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MY LADY'S BANNER

A NOVEL

BY

HEBER K. DANIELS

AUTHOR OF

"Digby Ravelyn," "Tales of a Terrace," etc., etc.

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BY

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AUTHOR OF "DIGBY RAVELYN," "OUR TENANTS," "TALES OF A TERRACE," ETC.

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MY LADY'S BANNER.

CHAPTER I.

A MODERN BARBARIAN.

The autumnal storm had spent its fury upon the Cotswolds, and the clamorous wrack of thundercloud was passing heavily away to the northeast under stress of the equinoctial winds, leaving the dripping solitudes of hill and dale to the silver light of the ascending moon.

On such a night as this the ancient castle of Tarnworth, rising sheer from the waters of the Cotsbourne, with its surroundings of wooded pleasaunce and rolling hills, was never at such an advantage from a weirdly picturesque point of view.

The outer bailey, or esplanade, of the castle, together with its barbican, had long since disappeared with the ages when their uses were more than justified by current events, and had given place to the more modern pleasaunce, or park—a terraced and wooded inclosure of vast extent and of a rare beauty. But there still remained the stately and massive keep, and some half-a-dozen small crenulated towers flanking the inner bailey, with its chapel, its hall, and the residence of the family; the whole circumscribed by an embattled wall of enormous solidity and strength.

On the south side of the castle all access had disappeared with the bridge, which the present owner had not vouchsafed to replace, when time and last year's freshet had carried it away; and the only visible means of entry was on the north side, at the lodge gates adjoining the public road—at the bottom of the pleasaunce grounds before referred to; and, through the latter, over the drawbridge crossing the moat, and thus, under the heavy main gateway into the inner courtyard, or bailey.

Contrary to custom, the titular hamlet of Tarnworth, instead of being grouped about the castle base, lay some three miles further away to the north, in a depression among the hills; the castle itself, standing alone on the hillside, in evidence of the hereditary exclusiveness of the Diarroghs, whose last representative, Sir Balefred, had but recently passed away—leaving the estate of his Welsh ancestors to his widow, the beautiful, if mysterious, Rufina del Montefuego, whom he had met and married during his life-long sojourn in northern Spain.

Of the lady herself little was absolutely known. She had, from the very outset (even in her husband's lifetime), met the advances of the neighboring squirearchy with such marked uncordiality that she was soon relegated to that condition of social isolation to which she seemed to aspire.

Personally, she was seldom seen. Thickly veiled, and reclining in the corner of the family phaeton, she was swiftly conveyed at eventide from the castle to the station, and from the station to the castle (again after dark) during her periodical visits to the Continent. Yet, always alone, or under the guidance of her major-domo—a man of herculean build, and as voiceless, and generally uncommunicative, as his beautiful mistress. For beautiful she certainly was, notwithstanding that she had earned for herself the unenviable *sobriquet* of "My Lady Sinister of Castle Dangerous."

Scarcely had the din of the wrangling elements subsided in the distance when the uproar was taken up by the clamor of human voices in dispute at the lodge gates—interpolated at intervals by a howl of inarticulate rage.

"Ay, shout your worst, ye old tongueless devil!" cried the first voice, tauntingly, "for we're neither afraid of yourself nor your witch of a mistress up at the castle! What say you, William?"

"Right, lad," replied the second voice in the same loud key. "Things have come to a turn, indeed, when an Englishman mayn't stand under a wall for shelter without being driven off like a dog by the paid bully of a foreign gypsy! Put up your stick, man, or by all that's living, we'll lay that long body of yours out on the road, for the first coroner to sit upon."

Nevertheless the two last speakers, despite their tall words, were slowly backing away along the white road before the threatening approach of the gigantic major-domo, who, with uplifted staff, and face contorted with passion, was clearly bent upon courting the peril they had predicted for him.

The retreat soon generated into a rout—the pursued having greeted the advancing janitor with a volley of road-metal, and, without waiting to survey the result, had incontinently turned and fled. The pursuer, with the blood streaming from a wound on his face, and roaring aloud with a passion, to which the obvious absence of a tongue admitted of no verbal expression, ran swiftly after them; and so, amidst a storm of oaths and bellowings, they disappeared in the darkness up the hillside.

It was at this juncture that a youth and maid, coming up the road from the opposite direction, halted in the moonlight before the open wicket gate of the lodge, and, with one accord, stood gazing at each other in silence, and after the manner of those who, having gotten themselves into some species of scrape, mutely appeal to one another by look for some means of succor from their predicament.

The state of their apparel, apart from the mud-bespattered condition of their bicycles, on which they had toiled up the slope, was clearly indicative of a long and wearisome journey, and the pallid face of the girl, with its anxious, not to say alarmed expression, only too obviously pointed to a state of physical collapse. The youth had noted the look with undisguised consternation, and taking the handlebars from her trembling grasp, conducted the machine into the castle grounds; and having placed it, together with his own roadster, against the walls of the lodge, returned to her side—only in time to catch her in his arms as she was about to sink to the ground.

"Marion, my darling, you are completely knocked up! I can not hear of your journeying another step. The village is at least three miles further ahead, and you must not dream of reaching it in your present weak condition. Come, there is a light inside. Let us go in and rest awhile, and to-morrow we will proceed to Bristol by train."

"It is only a momentary faintness, Evelyn," she replied, with a brave little attempt at rally. "I—I—will be quite strong again—believe me, I will—after a few minutes' rest. That last hill, in the rain, was a little too much for me. Don't let us go in—pray, do not, dear. I don't like the look of the place. It seems uncanny! Besides, the people may object to it."

"Object! Surely they would never be so inhuman as to refuse you shelter on a night like this, my poor child!"

It was customary with him to refer to her in this paternal fashion on occasion. Her fragile form of almost fairy-like beauty seemed to demand it of him. But they were little better than boy and girl lovers nevertheless, being yet in their teens, though the sturdy appearance of Evelyn Darley—a very Prince Charming among youths, with his crisp brown curls and fresh, clear-cut features—seemed, so far as he was concerned, to denote a maturer age.

"Come, come, Marion, you must really defer to me *now*," he went on with a cheery smile, as he passed his arm tenderly about her waist. "When we are married, and settled into the ways of fogydom, then, perhaps, I may have to withdraw my prerogative. But for the present, my dear, you must obey me. Come along."

She rewarded this sally with a look of innocent and loving trustfulness as together they passed under the gateway and into the domains of "My Lady Sinister of Castle Dangerous."

The door of the lodge was closed and locked, and despite repeated hails and a vigorous appeal to the knocker on the part of young Darley, there was no response from within. Before them, in the broad moonlight, a stately avenue of cedar and elm stretched away into the distance to a point where the castellated pile of Tarnworth rose in all its somber and medieval grandeur.

Notwithstanding her sudden terror and extreme dislike of the place, her increasing weight on his arm and the deathful pallor that was now in her cheeks, led him to set off suddenly up the avenue, with only one object in his half-distracted mind, and that, at all hazards, to reach some place where she might be safely housed, and receive the care which her alarming condition of prostration seemed so urgently to call for.

"Trust all to me, my darling," he murmured in her ear, as, half leading, half carrying her slight figure in his powerful arms, he pressed swiftly onward under the shadow of the elms—his eyes strained on a distant light in the castle, and his heart, against hers, beating fiercely in his commiseration and anxiety for his young love. "See, there is a light in the castle—a shadow has passed before it. Someone will be there to lend us aid. Courage, Mabs—only a few steps further."

"Yes, Evelyn, dear, I trust—I trust," was all the response the poor girl was capable of, as the lids drooped wearily down over the dark gray eyes, and the little head, with its aureola of blonde tresses, sank heavily on his shoulder.

"She has fainted—my poor, worn-out little Mabs," muttered the youth as he kissed her cold cheek, and then, taking her up into his arms, proceeded at a running pace toward the castle.

Crossing the drawbridge over the moat, he made for the portcullis entrance; but finding it closed, and the windows in its proximity in darkness, he turned off to the left in the direction of the solitary light shining from a lower apartment. Halting on the graveled walk, he called up loudly for help; but the only response to his summons was the multitudinous echoings of his voice among the angles of the walls, or a sleepy caw of a startled rook high up in the ivies of the main tower.

He laid his burden tenderly down in a natural bower formed by a cluster of myrtles under the castle wall, and removing his coat, placed it gently under the unconscious little head of his lady-love. Then, starting off at a run, and aided by the bright moonlight, he commenced a rapid tour of search along the confines of the castle, and was rewarded at length by the discovery of a small postern door, which, to his surprise and delight, yielded to his efforts, and gave access to a small anteroom—from whence a dimly-lit corridor led, as he surmised, into the private rooms of the resident family.

Passing onward through a miscellaneous collection of armor and implements of bygone warfare, as rapidly as the semi-darkness would admit of, he shortly found himself in what appeared to him to be a vast room of state; the walls were hung with Venetian mirrors, old needlework tapestry, and a number of priceless originals of the old masters; and, distributed about the polished oak floor-space was a quantity of richly carved and ponderous oak furniture—with here and there a rare table in buhl or marquetry. The few lights burning in the enormous cut-glass chandeliers above revealed the open doorway on the opposite side; and passing through this, he found himself in the state bedroom appertaining to the apartment which he had just quitted.

Without pausing, except to note that this room also was unoccupied, he passed through it, and entered a third room, paneled in white and gold, whose appointments were, if anything, of a more sumptuous description than either of the two he had seen.

Sick at heart, and worried to distraction at the thought of the young girl in all her helplessness outside, he was about to call aloud for assistance when his eyes fell upon a large oil painting that rested upon an easel at the further end of the room, and troubled in mind as he was, he could not restrain the exclamation of surprise and admiration which the imperial and lovely majesty of that presentment evoked.

The painting was still in a somewhat unfinished state—indeed, the paraphernalia of the artist and the chair, or rather the throne, of the sitter were close at hand; but the head and bust had received their last deft touches, and represented a woman, apparently of about twenty-six years of age—of an exquisite, if, perhaps, repellent beauty, robed in purple velvet, and seated upon a throne of ivory.

The face might have been that of a Silome, a Judith, an Herodias—the queenly Juno herself on receiving tidings of her lord's misdoings: so disdainful and hard the full glance of those eastern, heavy-lidded dark eyes —so little softened by the masses of raven-hued locks that clustered on the low, broad, and olive-tinged brow. The small, cruel-looking mouth, with its short upper lip, and the crimsoned lines drawn slightly downwards at the corners—as though in contempt for the awe-inspired gazer—was further accentuated by the resoluteness of the chin; though the general appearance of *hauteur* in this fascinating portrait was somewhat redeemed by the soft lines of femininity apparent in the rare contour of the cheeks, the stately rounded throat, and the voluptuous bust—revealed, in part, by a tightly fitting bodice, cut low and squarely in front.

Truly the artist, whoever he might have been, had, in his endeavor to reproduce nature, done more than well; for it was with almost an effort that the youth was able to withdraw his gaze from those eyes, whose sinister depths seemed to threaten doom to the rash intruder.

He was about to turn away from the portrait and quit the room, when a concealed door in the paneling before him softly opened, and the tall form of a lady robed in a purple velvet—the exact replica of the painting on the easel—stood framed in the dark opening, and who, on seeing a stranger in the apartment, started suddenly, and then, her heavy brows contracted with displeasure, and her dark eyes alight with the baleful glow that was wanting in the portrait, stood gazing upon the devoted youth with all the resentment of a surprised Artemis.

CHAPTER II.

"BRAVO! HE HAS THROWN HIM INTO THE MOAT!"

Long and fixedly did the Lady of the Castle—the mysterious Rufina del Montefuego, Lady Diarrogh—eye the temerous youth before she ventured to address him; and as she gazed, the double furrow of displeasure on her brow softened and disappeared, and her eyes were disposed to scan his features a little less unkindly; for she had noted the look of awed admiration that had been transferred from the portrait to herself, and—well, she was a woman, and could ill afford to undervalue the implied compliment.

For one brief moment her glance had wandered away to her favorite bust of Antinous in its niche within the alcove, and in the comparison set up in her mind between the handsome young East-Anglian and the ill-fated Bithynian youth the former lost nothing by the process.

For, indeed, he was personable far beyond the ordinary, was this young Lincolnshire gentleman. Standing there before her—little, if at all abashed—his frank, healthy young face flushed with the excitement of the occasion, his large brown eyes sparkling with pleasure at the thought of his sweetheart's impending succor, his well-set head with its profusion of chestnut-brown curls thrown slightly back with the dare of young manhood, the firmly knit jersey-clad body on the sturdy limbs, whose shapely calves were well set off by the knickers of cycledom—standing before her thus, we say, with these featurely and personable attributes, he had, in her opinion, a decided advantage over the beautiful Bithynian by virtue of his sheer masculinity, and in so far as the absence of effeminacy is always a certain passport to a woman's favor.

She moved out toward him with a regal step, and having acknowledged his bow with some condescension, addressed him in a rich low voice in which there was little, if any, trace of a foreign accent.

"Why are you here, sir? My castellan has orders to permit no one within the castle precincts without my special order."

In a few hurried and eager words he informed her of the predicament in which he and his cousin had found themselves, and he implored her immediate aid on behalf of his fair comrade, whom he had left outside in such terrible need.

During his recital she had seated herself quietly on the ivory chair of state, and sat looking down into his excited and pleading face with some appearance of interest on her Sphinx-like features.

"You say she is outside and indisposed—this Miss

Wilton. I am sorry for her. Sorry for my sex, for they should know better than to indulge in such mad enterprises. How came you to be permitted to enter here? What could Breconridge have been thinking about to sanction it? Have you been directed? Tell me—quick?"

There was a look of eager suspicion in her eyes as she put the question to him, although it was speedily dispelled by the ingenuousness of his reply.

"Believe me, madam, I had no intention of intruding on your privacy. I found the lodge gates open, and the lodge itself untenanted, and my cousin's condition of health was my sole excuse for entering and seeking for the help she so sorely stands in need of. Oh, you will send someone with me to her at once—will you not? She may even at this moment be at death's door."

In his terrible despair, and scarcely knowing what he was doing, he had seized her by the hand and was standing awaiting her answer to his appeal in breathless anxiety.

At the touch of his hand and the meeting of their eyes she had crimsoned to the brows, and, for the first time for many a year, the dark languorous orbs drooped in confusion before the gaze of another.

"Stay!" she cried, in a voice that had evidently been ever used to command, as he was about to rush from the room with some frantic notion in his head of making his appeal to some other less inhuman than this dispassionate fair. "I will summon help, and have her brought here to us."

His murmured words of sincere gratitude were cut short by a piercing scream that floated in through the open casement, followed by a piteous cry of "Evelyn! Evelyn! Help me!"

Dashing from the room, without word of apology to Lady Diarrogh, young Darley (nearly overturning a man who had entered quietly from behind them) made his way in headlong flight along the series of apartments into the corridor, and from thence into the castle grounds.

"Quick, Diego! hasten after him!" cried the Lady Rufina, in Spanish, to the astonished newcomer—a lean-visaged, though handsome young man of artistic appearance, as he stood staring at her in speechless wonder at the suddenness of the phenomenon. "No questions, but follow the English youth to the castle main entrance with all speed, and before any mischief shall arise. Then conduct him and the young lady to my presence. Not a word, Señor—go!"

In her eagerness she had pushed him from her toward the door, and, with a muttered "as my lady pleases," he sped after the young man as rapidly as his bewildered condition would admit of.

Left to herself, her bosom filled with sentiments of quite an abnormal kind, the lady of the castle hied her to the casement, and with flushed cheeks and eager eyes leaned far out into the bright moonshine to reconnoiter the position below.

The scene that lay outstretched before her was beautiful in the extreme. The park, in the ethereal light of the full white moon, presented a panorama so fay-like in its loveliness, with its contrasts of shadow and sheen, of silver-tipped boscage and moony dell, that Mab and all her attendant sprites must surely that night have met and danced upon its lawns, or along the banks of the lilied moat beneath.

But the beauties of the landscape had little fascination for the proud surveillance of the imperious chatelaine. Her eyes had become riveted upon a group of dark forms by the drawbridge, toward whom a solitary figure was flying along the terrace with the speed of desperation.

"Forbear, you rash boy; they will surely harm you!" she exclaimed with unwonted animation as she recognized young Darley, and divined his immediate purpose of assault and battery upon the group aforesaid, conspicuous among whom towered the figure of Breconridge, her castellan, with Marion Wilton in his grasp and defiance to the pursuer in his aspect, as he essayed to drag the shrieking maid across the bridge into the park.

"Well done! Bravo, my Antinous!" she continued with uncontrolled glee, clapping her jeweled hands together as the fleeing figure, launching itself among the crowd of pursuivants, and, scattering them to the right and left like ninepins, bore down upon the devoted Breconridge with the resistless fury of one possessed.

"He has him by the throat! The girl is released! See—they struggle together on the bridge! They are down—the youth is underneath. Nay, *caramba!* but he is up again, and has the other around the waist with a grip of steel! Bravo! Bravo! *Madre de Dios!* What is this he would do? He has thrown the invincible Breconridge over the bridge into the moat. Let the dog drown, for he has been remiss in his duty. See, see, the rest are about to close in upon him! Dare to touch him, ye curs, and you shall all be sent forth to starve. Oh, do not hurt him! Stay, it is Diego! They have learned my wishes then, these dogs, and, *gracias a mi Dios*, all will be well! Yes, they come this way. I must prepare suitably to receive them!"

As she turned with flashing eyes and heaving bosom from the window, she perceived, with an angry start, that she had not been alone, and that her excited comments had apparently been overheard by the tall, sombre-looking Spaniard, who, wrapped in the heavy folds of his dark mantle, his arms folded on his breast, had entered the room unheard, and was now confronting her with a look of vexed surprise.

"*You* here, Don Domingo!" she exclaimed with considerable asperity, and stamping her small foot petulantly on the polished floor. "How often have I told you that your visits must be announced? I will not have my privacy thus intruded upon with impunity. Pray you leave the room, for I am undisposed to see you to-night!"

"But, Rufina—sister!" he stammered, somewhat crestfallen under the scornful scrutiny of those brilliant eyes, as he held up one hand deprecatingly. "I was informed by Mercedes that you were sitting for your portrait to Diego, and naturally enough considered I was justified in entering. Besides, sister mine," he added with a searching look, "I called to you twice, but, *caramba*, you appeared to be so occupied with events outside the castle that you heard me not! May I ask what is the meaning of this uproar which has even reached my apartment and caused me to seek you here?"

She had recovered herself in a measure now, and with a glance of the coldest indifference, swept scornfully by him and took her former seat on the raised daïs as she replied to him in a tone of icy coldness—

"An Englishman has wandered into the castle in aid of his companion, a young lady in distress, and has been interfered with by Breconridge. I have sent for them. That is all."

"But he has seen you—this Englishman, whom you but recently apostrophized at yon window—he has been with you here!" exclaimed the Spaniard hotly, as his sallow cheeks fired with annoyance. "Have a care, sister! Have a care!"

"You forget yourself, Don Domingo!"

"*Nombre de Dios!* Forget myself, madam! Do you wish to ruin all?"

"And why ruin all, Señor, if I choose to extend my hospitality for one night to strangers in distress?"

"I will tell you, Señora. Because you are a woman, and susceptible. Because the most sacred cause of 'el Señor' will be more than jeopardized by the intrusion of a native into our counsels. Forbear, I tell you! Let them depart this night, this hour, in peace. I know the ways of women's hearts, oh, my sister. Yours, God be thanked, has hitherto—even as a wife—had no experience of the fierce madness of this passion of love, much less of a hopeless love. Beware, then, the beginning! It is not too late. Sister, hear me, I beseech you, before the moment has passed forever!"

In his agitation he had thrown himself upon his knees at her feet, his hands held up to her in supplication, and his dark features convulsed with anger and despair.

She rose suddenly to her feet, and with a contemptuous sweep of the hand, and a voice trembling with constrained passion, she bade him also arise.

“Less loud, Señor, for they are already within the castle on their way to this room, and it will be to your benefit that no word of this foolish rhodomontade shall reach their ears. For, by all the saints in the calendar, el Señor himself included, I will brook no interference, brother, in the personal concerns of my establishment. How dare you! Stand away from me, sir, and, mark you, if you so much as offer to insult these my guests by a word or a look during their stay, then, Señor, the interests of the ‘cause’ will indeed be jeopardized, and on your head will rest the consequences.”

She had hissed the words in his face with an expression of countenance that was not at all pleasant to witness, and as he retired from her side, cowed, and meekly repentant under the fury of her speech and the bitterness of that terrible look, she added, with a refinement of malignity that caused him to fairly wince again:

“Pray you dissemble those petulant grimaces, my brother—they do not become you—and be prepared to receive my guests with the utmost courtesy. So, so; that is better. Now, *vaya con diablo!*”

CHAPTER III.

THE LOVER COMETH.

"*El Señor Inglès, y la Señorita,* my lady!" announced Diego Suarez, the painter, as he entered the room accompanied by young Darley, Miss Wilton, and some half a dozen cloaked and swarthy looking gentlemen of foreign aspect—behind whom the redoubtable major-domo slunk in, considerably subdued in look, and bearing unpleasant traces of his recent immersion.

"*Mi pobre,* Don Carlos, I feared as much!" muttered Don Domingo in his beard as his eyes fell upon the young Englishman, flushed with excitement, his hair disheveled, and leading by the hand his little sweetheart, now somewhat recovered from her indisposition and fright, and presenting, with her soft, Greuze-like features and sunny hair, a striking contrast to the dark faces about her. But dissembling quickly at a glance from his imperious sister he greeted the young girl with a profound bow, and, bidding her welcome in fairly good English, led her by the hand to Lady Diarrogh, who, completely transformed in the interval, was now graciousness itself as she hastened forward with a ravishing smile to kiss her guest's cheek affectionately, and, with profuse apologies for the recent *contretemps,* to seat her by her side.

"Ah, Mercedes!" she cried to a young maiden who had entered the room at this juncture, and now stood gazing from face to face with unmitigated surprise. "See, what a misfortune has befallen this young lady to-night, during a madcap tour from Lincoln to Bristol with her cousin, the young señor here. They have been overtaken by the storm, and have appealed to my hospitality for a night's shelter. It is theirs, of course, with all my heart, and I only regret that their sudden advent should have subjected them to some rudeness from my major-domo. You will take the young lady to the suite of rooms in the Knight's Tower, and afford her a complete change of apparel; and, if she is sufficiently recovered, she will rejoin us at supper in the hall. Go, *mi pobresita.* Mercedes will see to your needs; and to-morrow, after breakfast, we will have a long, long talk, *familiarmente,* before your departure."

"They will not remain, then, *Gracias a Dios!*" muttered Don Domingo with a sigh of relief; though some feeling of regret seemed to rise within him, nevertheless, as he boldly eyed the winsome young girl who pressed so closely to her lover's side.

"As for you, Señor," continued Doña Rufina, turning to the pleased youth with a gracious face, on which not a particle of her former austerity was apparent, "Don Domingo, my brother, will conduct you to your room, and see to your needs. You will rejoin us with Miss Wilton at table, and then we shall hear a little more of this delightful little *escapada*—so English in its incomprehensibleness, which has afforded us the pleasure of entertaining you in our poor house."

"May I go, Evelyn?" asked the young girl of him, as she still held him by the hand and looked about her a little apprehensively.

"Why, of course, Marion!" he replied, with a reassuring smile, as he relinquished her to the young lady who had been addressed as Mercedes. "You will be all the better for the complete change of those damp clothes, and for a long rest. Lady Diarrogh—to whom, I am informed, I have the honor of speaking—for myself, and on behalf of Miss Wilton, I have to thank you most heartily for this unexpected kindness; and I only regret that our appearance should have been the cause of the unpleasant little misunderstanding that recently occurred outside. Perhaps these gentlemen will now accept my apologies, very sincerely offered?"

"My countrymen will most certainly accept them, Señor," put in her ladyship hastily, in view of the anything but friendly looks with which her compatriots still regarded him. "It was a pure mistake —regrettable, of course, but a mistake, nevertheless. Gentlemen, you will shake hands with the English señor, and accept his apology forthwith. Don Santiago, your hand; and yours, Don Urbano. What, Don Francisco! and you, my dear Don Saturnino; it is my wish! There, that is as it should be. Now, Don Adriano, and my faithful servidor, Don Fabricio del Monte, it is your turn. So, so, *mi allegre mucho* to see you all friends. As for you, Breconridge, you have done well, though your absence from your post merited the disaster thereby involved. You may retire to the lodge, and see to it in future, please, that in your unavoidable absence you have a substitute for your place, equally as faithful as yourself. Gentlemen, I will dispense with your further attendance until supper. In the meanwhile, Señor Suarez, to the business of this painting. *Hasta luego, Señores.*"

With a queenly obeisance to her native *caballeros*— who seemed for some reason to be far from easy at mind—and a pleasant smile to young Darley and Miss Wilton, as they also prepared to retire, Rufina del Montefuego settled herself with a sigh of relief into her extemporized throne, and posed herself for the business of the evening.

"*Bueno, amigos,* what think you?" observed the Spaniard who had been introduced as Don Fabricio del Monte, as he foregathered with his companions in the vestibule. “Is it not a foolish caprice this on the part of my fair cousin to encourage the visits of *estrangeros Inglès* at the most critical period of our operations?”

“*Ciertamente, Señor,*” replied Don Adriano, a thick-set individual, with a dark spade-beard and a deep cicatrized wound that extended from his brow to the point of his nose. “And I think I am voicing the sentiments of these *càballeros* when I say that had not the meddling painter come upon the scene with her message, neither the English ‘meester’ nor his fair young ‘mees’ would ever have passed out from these walls again.”

His words were greeted with a murmur of approval by the assembled compatriots.

“You have right, my friend,” said Don Fabricio, approvingly. “Pest take them! Did you observe how even my cousin and chief, Don Domingo, eyed her—this slip of a girl—as though he also were about to permit his affections to shake his allegiance to our sovereign, Don Carlos, whom God preserve in his rights?”

At the mention of the name of the Pretender his companions, with a muttered “*Dios lo guarda!*” removed their sombreros in respectful salutation, and drew closer around him.

“Hush, speak low, Señores!” continued Del Monte, with a furtive glance over his shoulder in the direction of the corridor, "for have we not two pairs of eyes and ears too many with us this evening—if not a third!"

"You have communicated your suspicions to me before, Señor del Monte," observed Don Saturnino, a sinister looking old gentleman, of slight build but dignified presence. "You mean this Diego—Diego Suarez, the painter——"

"What, Señor Suarez! Impossible," broke in a third speaker, of handsome features and the air of a true grandee. "Why, Fabricio, he was only last week received in audience by 'el Señor' himself at Antwerp, and conveyed most important dispatches with his own hands to Lady Diarrogh. Nonsense, amigo, why should you doubt him? Have you then any evidence of his perfidy?"

"None whatever, Don Francisco, except, perhaps, in the trick of his eye. He is, moreover, but half a Spaniard, which means a whole Italian, and what should *they* know of loyalty as it is understood by us *hidalgos?*"

"Bah! That goes for nothing, Fabricio. Is not our Lady Diarrogh herself of gypsy blood, and would you have me presume to doubt her integrity also?"

"Hitherto, no. But if the castle becomes the house of refuge for every touring cyclist that passes by it, I may have every reason to distrust her ladyship as well."

"Come, come, gentlemen," interposed the youthful Urbano y Rodriguez, "no more of these suspicions, or, like the conspirators of comic opera, we may soon become afraid of our very shadows. What of the King, Fabricio? What message—and how fares the cause?"

"True, Don Urbano. I had forgotten; for these doubts and surmises are rare enemies to dispatch. Briefly, His Majesty thanks us with his usual graciousness for our disinterested services on his behalf in the Basque provinces, bids us all to be of good cheer, and to be prepared at any moment for the signal that calls us to his side in that irresistible march upon the Capital, and——"

"*Viva Don Carlos!*" cried the excitable young Don Urbano, as he threw his hat in the air, and was immediately suppressed by the more cautious Fabricio.

"Silence, *amigo!* And remember, *caballeros,* not a syllable of this matter during the stay of the young strangers in the castle. Moreover, whatever suspicions I may have communicated to you in regard to Don Diego, not a word of them must reach the ears of Doña Rufina or her brother, with whom, as you are well aware, he is a *persona grata.* For, after all, *mi amigos,* it must be remembered that as exiles, to all intents and purposes, we are to some extent dependent on her bounty while the political position remains as it is. Hah, Breconridge!" he added, as the sullen major-domo limped into the room on his way to the lodge. "Have you fought so invincibly with us in all our battles in Spain for 'el Señor' to be vanquished by so tender a stripling as this bicyclist in fair combat? *Caramba,* but that was a superb backthrow! You went over into the moat, my friend, as helplessly as a sack of maize. Here, *amigo,* is some silver for you; and, hark you, if you should again have the misfortune to try another bout with him, trust less to muscle than to cold steel, as we do in old Spain. For we hidalgos object to being pounded and thrown about like joints in a butcher's shop, and prefer to fight, on fairer terms, with the butcher's weapon."

"There goes a brave old dog—a very John Bull for stubborn valor," he added, as the mute, with a stiff military salute, and a glance of the utmost significance, went out into the night. "He fought well in the provinces for us—as well as the best of them, until the shot that removed his tongue laid him also *hors de combat.* Yes, he is as true as steel, and the most suitably discreet major-domo Doña Rufina could have selected for our purpose."

"Tell me, *amigo,*" inquired the young Urbano, "was he not originally the servant of Lord Diarrogh before milord actively espoused our cause in Spain?"

"*Justamente*, Señor, and moreover fought shoulder to shoulder with his lordship—whom the saints assoil—in many a hard-contested fight; ay, and side by side, too, with his mistress, the present Lady Diarrogh, who handled the musket and courted the bullets as fearlessly as the stanchest *muchacho* in the army. Heaven send that she and her brother may stoop to no folly in this our hour of action. Yet this youth and his young companion are of extreme comeliness, and I like not the eagerness with which she has welcomed them, when, before now, and for less cause, a trespasser within the castle has been summarily and expeditiously thrown into the road. *Vamos,* Señores; we meet Don Domingo in council at the West Tower over this latest dispatch from the King. At supper we shall see them together, and form a better judgment. Don Santiago, after you."

And, wrapped in their voluminous mantles, like midnight mutes they filed silently out into the moonlit court.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BANQUET IN THE CASTLE.

A stranger suddenly entering the supper chamber or great hall of Tarnworth Castle that night, without any knowledge of its occupants, might almost have been led to believe in the actuality of ghostly visitations, and that the Diarroghs and their Celtic dependents of a bygone generation were holding high revel after their usual midnight custom.

At the head of the table, in the center of the vast hall, with her newly arrived guests on either side of her, sat the incomparable lady of the castle, her dark features with the eyes that Murillo would have loved to depict, chastened and trebly beautified by the soft light from the innumerable wax lights in the massive chandeliers overhead; her magnificent proportions robed in black Genoa velvet of the costliest description, and, clustering about her throat and bosom in creamy frills, rich laces of an antique and priceless design; while amid her sable tresses, and upon her hands and wrists, gems of every conceivable color smoldered and flashed in the soft light.

On her left, and by the side of Marion Wilton, sat her brother, Don Domingo del Montefuego, his handsome if somewhat malevolent-looking features lit up with an unusual animation as he bent in respectful converse toward the maiden, who, bewildered by the magnificent barbarity of the Gothic surroundings, and the dark and sad-looking faces with beards of formal cut, that confronted her along the board, heeded less his grandiose compliments than the, to her, dream-like movements of the silent menials, the soft music of the hidden choir in the gallery, and, above all, the fascinating presence of Doña Rufina, who (in the opinion of her compatriots) seemed to have called forth all her latent charms of manner and conversation in order to impress her guests with a sense of her normal *bonhomie* and thoughtless *abandon.* Clad in a loose-fitting, puff-sleeved robe of green silk, the property of the petite Mercedes, her fair hair undesignedly arranged in coils of bewildering beauty about the small, well-shaped head, the young girl, with the flush of sweet maidenhood on her cheeks and the tender love-light in her large gray eyes as they fell at intervals on Darley's form, might with all propriety have sat for the portrait in oils that hung on the wall above her—to wit, the beautiful, if luckless, Amy Robsart.

To young Darley, who was naturally of a joyous and light-hearted, if impressionable, disposition, the novelty of the scene was a direct incentive to his best endeavors, both in conversation and amiability of manner, and with the Señorita Mercedes, Don Fabricio's sister, on one side of him, and his hostess on the other, he certainly appeared to rise to the level of the occasion.

He had discarded his damp clothes for the less serviceable, if more picturesque, court dress of a Spanish grandee—the somber folds of which, lending a dignity so novel to him as she had always known him, that the little maid, his lady-love opposite, could scarcely refrain from regarding him from time to time with admiring wonder, although the look was at times tinged with surprised concern when she perceived the tokens of interest with which her hostess appeared to look upon him, when, drawn by her unreserve, he chatted to her with all the familiarity of an old acquaintance.

Debarred from joining in the general conversation by virtue of their ignorance of the English language, the Spaniards at the end of the table sat in melancholy silence—appealing to one another from time to time with significant looks and low muttered monosyllables expressive of their displeasure at this ill-advised display of frivolity on the part of their hostess.

"Hah! what said her ladyship to the English *caballero* then, Señor Suarez?" inquired Don Saturnino of the painter, who, sitting with the venerable hidalgo at the extreme end of the table, seemed to be more troubled than any of his companions at the progress of affairs at the upper board. " Please to construe for me, for you are somewhat acquainted with the idiom."

" You are observant, Señor. Her ladyship has asked the young Darley and Miss Wilton to honor her house by extending their visit for some few days longer."

" *Sapristi!* And what said he in reply to that?"

" He seemed to hesitate at first, but her persuasions having been seconded by her brother——"

" How! Don Domingo?"

" The same—he has accepted, and will write informing his father in Lincolnshire, and his companion's relations in Bristol, of their intention of staying. What think you of this, Señor?"

" That there is more in the invitation than this boy-faced Señor or his *querida* dreams of. Your ear, Don Francisco; for the very worst that we have feared has befallen."

Having whispered the intelligence to his neighbor, who immediately transmitted it to the others, the dark visages of the conspirators contracted with anger as they sat looking from one to the other with unqualified dismay at this unexpected perfidy on the part of the unconscious Don Domingo—who, seemingly fascinated by the innocent charm of his fair guest, remained oblivious to the storm his attitude had called forth.

"See, how she plies him with the wine—the silly-pated boy," observed the disgusted Don Saturnino, as he nudged the preoccupied Diego into attention. "And to think that this imperious lady, at whose proud feet the diadems of princes have been cast in vain, should succumb at last to the Arcadian simplicity of this mere stripling; and, worse still, that the *blasé* Don Domingo, her brother, who has consigned Cupid and his arrows to the devil, his master, until the King shall have gained his own—that he must needs play the fool, and, with his sister, risk the divulgence of our plans to the secret police, already hot on the scent of our machinations! Why, it is intolerable beyond belief! You must see to it, Señor Suarez!"

"How—I, Don Saturnino?" exclaimed the painter with a start, as he paled to the lips. "How shall it concern me, that am only her *dependiente*—a mere painter, and the least in her counsels?"

"H'm! the last, probably, Señor, but not the least—unless, of course, we must take it for granted that you have been permanently supplanted in her favor by Señor Darley. Tut, tut, there is no need for you to dissemble, man, for, *caramba*, we have not been blind. Heed me, therefore, when I say that the success or failure of her ladyship's designs are for the moment committed to you, my young friend. She will listen to you when she would only treat us with contumely. As for Don Domingo, he is already preparing for himself all the punishment that a woman scorned can bring upon him; for, see, the angry spot on the cheeks of his vixen cousin, the Doña Mercedes. She is of an observant and crafty disposition, and if it will lie in her power to thwart his designs on the young girl—whom I sincerely pity for her innocence—you may depend upon her exerting it on our behalf."

But he was speaking to deaf ears now, for the young painter, with his eyes fixed upon the debonair young Englishman, his cheeks of the hue of marble, and his breath coming and going in labored gasps, sat oblivious to his companion's presence—the living personification of bale unspeakable.

A slight tapping on the table presently drew all attention to the lady of Tarnworth, who, with flushed cheeks and ill-concealed triumph in her wondrous eyes, was glancing down the line of faces with a view to obtaining their attention to some remarks she was on the point of making.

"*Caballeros,*" she began in a gay tone of voice that was strangely belied by something of the old menacing look with which she had previously held the mutineers in check, "as my observations are more especially directed to you, I have the kind permission of my guests to address you in our native Castilian. Let us drink to the prosperity and happiness of those guests—el Señor Darley and la Señorita Wilton. You will, I am sure, learn with the utmost gratification, gentlemen, that this young couple, delighted with that hospitality which it has been our happy privilege as Spaniards to afford them, have acceded to my invitation and that of my brother—is it not so, my brother?"

"*Pues*, Señora," stammered the disconcerted Don Domingo, reddening painfully; "why not? it is only natural!"

"I say at my special invitation, seconded by that of my inestimable brother," she continued, with just the least *soupçon* of contempt in her tones, "el Señor Darley and his *fiancée*—you look surprised, gentlemen, his *fiancée*, I said—have decided to prolong their stay here as my guests for another week—indeed, until such times as they may become tired of our society. Señor Don Fabricio del Monte, you will please to maintain your seat in silence until I shall have concluded my remarks. I need scarcely point out, Señores, the unexpected pleasure which the stay of these young people will confer on us—so long used as we have been to the gloom of these walls, and desirous, as I am sure you all must be, for some change from the austerity of your daily avocations. For, Señores, it will be my endeavor to render their visit as felicitous and entertaining as the resources of my castle will admit. And in this effort I am certain I will have your best aids. As *hidalgos*, in whose veins the richest blood of Spain is apparent, you may be pleased to learn—from a social point of view—that this young gentleman is of ancient and courtly descent, his father being of the highest notables in Lincolnshire. This young damosel is also of a family no less high-born than that of the youth, her betrothed. Señores, you may depend on my endeavoring, with due caution, to enlist their suffrages on behalf of the cause we have so much at heart.

"*Caballeros*," she concluded, with a light hardening of her voice, and a look that rather denoted the stern mistress than the genial hostess, "you have known me for many years, both in the hour of extreme peril as well as on those occasions when, duty aside, a woman's caprice must needs be indulged, and you know, therefore, my very faithful *servidores*, that when Rufina del Montefuego has resolved upon a line of action, when her will has been proclaimed, that line of action must be asquiesced in, and by every means fostered by your kindly approval. Don Fabricio, my very appreciable cousin, I await the tenour of your remarks."

"I have none to offer, Señora," observed that gentleman, rising and bowing to his arrogant relative with every appearance of confusion in the action.

"And you, *caballeros?*" she pursued with an enquiring glance, in which amusement and contempt struggled for the mastery. "What, no word, gentlemen? Then am I indeed fortunate in having acquired so unanimous a vote of approval; and we will now, therefore, proceed without further parley to consolidate this amity by drinking to the healths of our youthful guests, on whom may all happiness attend in their future career."

The toast having nevertheless been drunk in ominous silence, her ladyship thought well to obviate further risk of an outbreak by rising from her seat, and thus proclaiming the entertainment at an end.

"Come, Señor Darley," she said, in a voice sufficiently audible to reach the ears of her retiring guests, "let me now perform the *rôle* of castellan, and show you some of the beauties of the castle before the sound of the gong shall summon us to our apartments. Don Domingo, my brother, and you, my cousin Mercedes, and—oh, yes—Señor Suarez, as my substitutes you will entertain Miss Wilton in the red drawing-room during my absence—where we will shortly rejoin you. *Caballeros, buenas noches.* Come, Señor Darley."

Taking the youth's arm, and bowing graciously to the discomfited grandees as they fell back on either side to give her passage, she led the way out of the hall.

CHAPTER V.

THE PAINTER SUAREZ.

As the assembled company trooped silently away through the old Norman porch, and the music of the harp and voices ceased in the gallery, two of their number had intuitively, as it were, retarded their steps, and were now confronting one another in the gloom of the old doorway. It was the Doña Mercedes del Monte and the painter Diego Suarez.

The small features and beady jet eyes of the little Andalusian maid, elfish enough at all times in their eerie beauty, were positively repulsive now with the working of a jealous fury that seemed to be reflected in the deadly-pale lineaments of the Spanish artist.

"Well met, Señor Suarez," she at length remarked, with a reckless little laugh and a toss of her black elf-locks. "You have been observant, then, *amigo?*"

"I have, Señorita," he replied, his eyes still riveted on the disappearing figures of the queenly *châtelaine* and her youthful charge. "And so I presume has the Señorita, or she would not, having disregarded her ladyship's instructions, be with me here instead of in the red room with el Señor del Montefuego, entertaining *la Inglèseta.*"

"You have a caustic tongue, Señor, the concomitant of a baffled regard!"

"As a sharpened wit, Señorita, is the privilege of a discarded lover. Pray you a truce to these idle commentaries, and let us understand one another."

"It is prudently said, my friend. But we have already seen and understood only too well. A Spaniard needs no grammar of love to define so obvious a situation. La Señora is infatuated; el Señor is infatuated; *los Inglès,* individually, are infatuated; we are discarded; ye, of the cause in Spain, are discarded; *los conspiradores* in England, my brother included, they are all discarded. *Voila tout!*"

"Good, Señorita! that is the grammatical inflection of the position, *justamente.* And the remedy for this deplorable condition of affairs?"

"It is here," said the brunette, taking a piece of paper from her bosom, and handing it to the other with a look of quiet malignity. "I obtained the particulars from the pocket of her robe during the process of change in the Knight's Tower."

He gave a start of pleasure as his eyes fell upon the writing and took in its import.

"I see, it is the addresses of their respective parents in Lincoln and in Bristol. You would write to them at once, giving them some warning of the peril with which their children are confronted, with a view to their immediate withdrawal from the castle—is that not so?"

"You have divined with the intuition of love, Señor. That is the position exactly. But no intimation of our disloyalty must afterwards reach the ears of La Señora or her brother. The letter, which will arrive with those of the *Inglès*, must be guardedly written, and above all, it must not be entrusted to Breconridge with the post-bag—he is not to be depended upon. I will post it myself in the village to-morrow morning. In the meanwhile, Don Diego, let no evidences of this our—shall we say chagrin, appear to the eyes of the *individuos* concerned."

"Love is blind, Señorita!"

"*Caramba*, why do you taunt me thus?" she exclaimed with sudden passion. "Has mutual misfortune, then, left no sentiment of pity in your breast for me—of revenge for this outrage? Is it not known to you that el Señor del Montefuego has asked, and obtained, my hand in marriage?"

"Pardon me, Doña Mercedes," he hastily replied, in tones whose tremulous depth of passion should have convinced her of his earnestness, "I had only the furtherance of our design in view, and not your pain, when I made the observation. With men, Señorita, the bitter disappointment of a great love seldom finds vent in mere words of passion. It rather affects deeds, and, believe me, *camarada*, they shall not be wanting if the march of circumstances demands their employment. Oh, Mercedes! you who have been of her secret counsels, and have read the strange workings of this woman's heart, tell me, is it not true that she has at times affected some regard, some tender regard, for the poor painter who has worshipped her very shadow since that fateful day when he first fell under her spell at Burgos?"

"Without doubt, my poor Diego," she replied, with words long drawn out as she watched their effect upon him with an evil glee. "I have not been blind, nor deaf, nor remiss in my advocacy of your pretensions; although the natural reticence of a maiden must be my excuse for not entering into the details of our conversations."

"Now, God be praised, but your words are of the sweetest sounding music that has entered this breast for many years!" exclaimed the unfortunate young man in rapture, as he pressed his lips to her hand. "It is a guerdon well worth the risking of so valueless a life as mine to obtain. Let us now depart, Señorita, to dispel suspicion, and to keep them under surveillance. I to the castle grounds, where I fear me she will have retired. You, Señorita, to the red-room. I will seek an opportunity of again meeting you in the early morning. Until then, *amiga mia*, vouchsafe to accept the assurance of my most distinguished consideration."

And so they parted—cordially distrustful of each other in all things except the mutually selfish affair that had appealed to their very worst instincts of vanity and passion.

Considerations of a far different nature were at the moment occupying the thoughts of the Doña Rufina and young Darley as, arm in arm together, they passed under the ancient portcullis gates, and emerged into the flood of brilliant moonlight that lit up the dew-spangled terrace and foliage with the tender gleams of countless faery diamonds.

To Evelyn, accustomed as he had long been to the timorous self-negation of the pretty Marion, the superb and commanding majesty of the matured Doña Rufina, leaning on his arm with the condescension of a monarch on that of a favored courtier, was an experience so novel and entrancing (apart from the love-impelling beauty of the surroundings) that there was no little danger of his head becoming turned in the interregnum that parted him from his cousin. He was, moreover, no stranger to the mild delights of flirtation, even had his natural instinct not availed itself of the opportunity; and he felt in the vanity of his youth flattered beyond measure that his society should have been deemed of sufficient interest to this glorious creature to warrant her having especially singled him out for her favors. And this without a particle of guile prepense; for, let us not be misunderstood, the lad was of a sterling honesty, and whatever his faults may have been, the puppyish conceit of many an elder in experience was not one of them.

What the lady, his companion, may have thought about the matter was not so apparent in her self-contained features. That the youth had awakened her regard was already a foregone conclusion, patent as we have seen to friend and foe alike. That this regard should suddenly have ripened into a passion of the most profound and enduring kind no one but a Spaniard, with Zingari blood in her veins, could have been led to understand. That it should have been so at all was of course most regrettable, and morally inexcusable in the circumstances; but we have, on the other hand, the moral duty of the veracious historian before us, and moral duty, as we all know, has little if any regard for the secrets of a woman's heart.

" You are very considerate, Mr. Darley, but I do not feel in the least cold," she answered to his concerned enquiry as to the wisdom of her having courted the night air. " We have nights in Spain of equal frigidity, and I may add of equal romance—nights for the lover, when, guitar in hand, he apostrophises his Dulcinea beneath the latticed window of her abode. As to the loneliness of the life in the castle, you have surmised correctly, it is of a verity most trist—a state of melancholy that is all the more emphasized by the presence of those we would fain cherish, but, alas! who are fated so soon to return to their felicities, leaving only the sorrow for their absence behind them!"

Something of the Spanish grandiloquence of phrase lent a strangeness of charm to her utterance as, with a tremulous sigh, she made a period to the soft tones of lament, and turned her face aside.

"But surely you have not to remain here of compulsion, Lady Diarrogh!" said the youth, in some embarrassment at the tenour of her concluding remark. "You have London near at hand. There are the neighbouring gentry. You will at times hold festivity within these grand old walls? Surely," he added, as he warmed under the spell of the dark eyes that had suddenly reverted to his, "you can command the attendance of gaiety—you, who are so young, so distinguished, so brilliant, and—so—so—beautiful!"

He could not for the life of him have evaded the adjective, though he reddened deeply under the sense of having gone too far.

But a playful flip of his hand with her soft fingers was all the chastisement his frowardness brought upon him.

"So you think I am beautiful then, you romantic boy?" she remarked, as she regarded him with the pleased look of some superb tigress marking down her prey. "You who have but this moment parted from the ravishing presence of *la belle* Marion! But there, I am not angry with you. Why should I be, who am older, and more experienced in the heart's insincerities? Tell me, then, have you been long engaged to your cousin, Miss Wilton?"

"We have been known to one another from childhood, Lady Diarrogh," was the comprehensive reply, delivered with all the artlessness of confiding youth.

"My poor boy!" she murmured to herself softly, but in tones, nevertheless, that reached his ears. "How I am then sorry for you, *mi pobresito!*"

"For me, madam?" he echoed with the intensest surprise.

"Pardon me, I had not intended you to overhear," she said with affected confusion. "I had forgotten myself for the moment. Yet is she but a child, with a child's impressionableness to mere externals."

Instinctively the thoughts of the youth reverted to the dark face and courtly presence of the fascinating Don Domingo, and, for the first time in his life's experience of love, the monster of jealousy appeared, and knocked at his young heart for admittance.

His silence seemed to have betrayed the drift of his thoughts and the success of her manœuvre.

"I fear me that I have been too precipitate, Mr. Darley," she presently ventured, with well-assumed concern, as she bent closer to him—"that I have offended you. I spoke with the emotion of a woman who values only too well the devotion of a heart that truly loves, and would grieve most sincerely to see its resources wasted on the altar of a woman's folly!"

"Lady Diarrogh!"

"Oh, pardon me, Mr. Darley! What is this I have said? Believe me, it is all foolishness; I presumed too much on my age and experience. Let us return to the castle."

But he was thoroughly aroused now, and his chagrin at the implied misconduct of the absent young girl was only equalled by the new and peculiar sentiment with which her unguarded solicitude had imbued him.

"But, Lady Diarrogh——"

"Nay, please not by that name!" she interrupted pleadingly, as she confronted him with a look of the most bewitching candour. "It is a great deal too formal coming from one whom I would desire to know better. I am known to my friends as Doña Rufina; to my intimate friends as Rufina—*simplemente*. Possibly you will choose, *mi amigo?*" She was gazing into his eyes now with a tenderness of appeal that was absolutely irresistible.

"Rufina," he uttered in a low voice of guilty acquiescence; and then, as the night winds might have whispered it, his own name—"Evelyn"—floated on his ears as, with her hand in his, and his heart filled with a tumult indescribable, they wandered silently on under the listening boughs of the ancient forest walk.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ENCHANTED YOUTH.

Far and wide did the steps of this strangely-assorted couple wander among the enchanting solitudes of the venerable pleasaunce. The gong of recall had clanged within the castle walls, and had roared its summons upon the terrace steeps; but its heathen blare had been addressed to deaf ears, and my Lady Diarrogh and her companion still meandered on in conversation obviously deep, and, of a certitude, most entrancing.

She had been led by his engaging complaisance to enter upon some details of the history of her past life. He had learnt how the enthusiasm for a dynastic cause could engross the attention of a young and beautiful woman to the utter exclusion of a youthful *tendresse*. How, led by this strange infatuation so natural to the politician of Spain, yet unintelligible to the minds of the dispassionate Northerner, her hand had been given in marriage to his countryman, Lord Diarrogh, whose advanced years was, in the eyes of her unscrupulous relatives, more than counterbalanced by his great riches, so sadly needed to maintain the struggle they had both so much at heart. Yet for his lordship she had nothing but the most unbounded admiration. He had voluntarily exiled himself from his country in the pursuance of the fortunes of " el Señor "—the King. He had been brave in battle, kindly in his treatment of the imperious beauty, his young wife, and was a worthy Englishman in the truest sense of the word. But, alas! she feared she had not been sufficiently cognizant of the devotion that had led him to these sacrifices. How could it be otherwise? She was of a passionate and impressionable nature: she had it of her Zingari forbears. He, worthy man, was of the cold, insular reserve of the inveterate Englishman. Thus amidst the stir and bustle of revolution, the, to her, fierce delights of the battlefield, and (as a sequel to disaster) the solitary exile in the castle of Tarnworth, her thoughts had ever turned inwardly; and, as the years had crept slowly on, she felt that she had indeed lost all touch with the softer phases of life, and above all with that youth-of-love without which life itself had become unendurable. With all the wild barbaric eloquence and gesture of her Romany ancestors she had endeavored to engage his young enthusiasms on behalf of the exiled prince, and with form erect and flashing eyes had, with the irresistible fervour of a modern Joan of Arc, appealed to his native sense of chivalry on her sovereign's behalf. And the young man had listened to it all with a glowing face and kindling eyes—infatuated, enthralled, and passively marvelling under the occult spell that seemed to be sweeping all his fealty to his cousin to the winds of the night.

Yet with all her passionate acclamation and *abandon* something of the reserve of pride, together with the innate tact of the woman, had kept her in hand and debarred her from committing herself by any direct statement of her mind toward him. She saw with that observance of male nature, in which she was an adept, that the time was not yet ripe, and that, whatever conclusions he may have formed in his mind, the too sudden avowal of this infatuation would only bring about the disaster which she could not trust herself even to contemplate—which, indeed, she had consecrated all her powers of fascination to obviate.

They had now approached to within a stone's-throw of the lodge gates when the sound of steps on the avenue behind them caused them to turn their faces in that direction.

"It is the painter, Diego," said the lady, with a shade of annoyance in her voice. "He is an extremely considerate young man; most persistently so. See—the wraps that he is bringing out to me! I rely on your discretion, *amigo mio*. Señor Suarez, I trust you have left the young Señorita Wilton in safe keeping?"

"The ladies have long since withdrawn, Lady

Diarrogh, and el Señor, your brother, has bidden me acquaint your ladyship with his desire to confer with you about to-morrow's arrangements before you retire for the night. Permit me to place these shawls about your ladyship's shoulders, for the night is keen."

She assumed them with laughing condescension, albeit his extreme pallor and the sour look with which he had greeted her companion had not escaped her all-observant eyes.

"I avail myself of your good offices, *mi amigo* Diego," she said with a repressive glance that was not to be withstood; "so disinterestedly offered, so *caballerosamente.* Pray permit me to take your arm, for I fear me I have wearied the Señor Darley."

And thus, with the young Englishman on one side silently occupied with his thoughts, and holding the Spaniard in amiable converse on the other, they gained the castle without the *contretemps* of which she had no slight fear.

Here she dismissed the devoted Don Diego with an irresistible grace of command, and, conducting young Darley to the door of his apartment, bade him good-night, and wished him pleasant dreams with so charming an inflection of voice that the enchanted youth had no option but to dream of her lovely self throughout the watches of that night.

In her boudoir, a dainty little apartment overlooking the courtyard, and fitted up in semi-Moorish fashion, with costly hangings and couches innumerable, she found her brother, Don Domingo, in impatient waiting.

"Well, *hermano mio!*" said she tentatively, as she threw herself on a leopard-skin couch, and proceeded with a smile of malicious pleasure to note the troubled expression on his distinguished-looking features. "Art thou moonstruck already? I beg of you to give me a cigarette."

He obeyed her silently, rolling the weed between his long fingers thoughtfully, and then holding a light to her for its ignition.

"Nay, how your hands are trembling, brother mine. *Carambo,* but if I did not understand you well, Domingo *mio,* I should be tempted by your restlessness of eye, and tremulousness of demeanour, to suspect that you were in love!"

"Sister, have peace! or if you must hold me to your raillery, at least remember that whatever my sin, I have the precept and example of my Lady Diarrogh, and that it is not the habitude of malefactors to recriminate until after they have been brought to account."

"Indeed, brother! Why, then, the dainty Titania has made good use of the interval."

"Assuredly, madam. I am already at her feet—her most devoted slave!"

"So it would appear, my poor Domingo. Yet what of the 'cause,' *amigo,* and who should be the suppliant now on ‘ el Señor's ’ behalf? Ah, ah, my brother! But, there; *vaya con suerte.* I can afford to be generous in a common misfortune."

" Accept of my profound devotion for the clemency, sister. But tell me, I pray, how fares it with the beautiful Bithynian? "

" What mean you, my appreciable brother? "

" Antinous, oh, my adorable sister! "

" You are jocose, Señor. Beware that you may have no cause to lament his disposition to jealousy."

" Then you have already been at work, *querida mio!* "

" *Naturalmente;* as I presume you have also in shaping the sentiments of the young *Inglèsita.* I think we understand one another, *amigo?* "

" We do, with wonderful unanimity, sister," he answered, with a grateful expression on his saturnine face as he seated himself at her feet. " And matters having arrived at this interesting stage, I thought well to seek you here for some counsel concerning our further attitudes. Possibly you will tell me what is next to be done, sister? "

" Nothing."

" But reflect a moment. They will soon have departed from us."

" *Quien sabe,* we shall see! "

She removed the cigarette from her lips and watched the ascending spirals of smoke with the most consummate affection of indifference imaginable.

"They arrived here unnoticed," she added, as though she were addressing herself to her thoughts, "and it does not follow by any means that their stay should be generally known to the county."

"But their parents will be advised of their visit, sister!"

"Not necessarily," she replied, with an assumption of indifference that caused him to stare at her in blank astonishment.

She took a couple of stamped and directed envelopes from her bosom and handed them to him.

"They were committed to my charge for the post this evening. Have the goodness, my brother, to place them upon the fire. Nay, do not look at me in that alarmed manner, but do as I have desired you. I have scrutinised every aspect of the case, and my resolution has been taken. To the fire, Señor!"

"But again reflect, my sister, what you would do. This is a criminal matter in the eye of the English law, this detention of English citizens in a castle against their will!"

"But it shall not be against their will, *amigo.* We must succeed by persuasion, aided by every insinuation that may be calculated to rend them asunder. But say no more. I have spoken. I am resolved. I have staked my life upon it! Listen, brother; if, as a result of failure, the castle itself were to fall about us, crush-ing all living souls within its walls, then let it topple in Heaven's name! Give me the letters. I herewith consign them and the English laws to equal perdition."

She arose, and deliberately placing the letters on the coals, watched them burst into flame and resolve themselves into ashes.

"And now," she continued, as she resumed her seat and her cigarette, "the Rubicon having been effectually crossed, and our boats burnt, I will look to you, my brother, to assist me in my endeavours to provide for you a charming little English wife."

"And Mercedes?"

"I will see to her."

"And Don Diego?"

"I will see to him—and to the others. *Caramba*, have I not hitherto driven them as effectually as any English four-in-hand? But I am tired of them all now and would willingly consign them to el Diablo, and with as little compunction as I have done those letters in the grate."

"There is some indication of manner among my friends that el Señor Suarez is not to be depended upon. Do you suspect it, sister?"

"I know it," she said bitterly, and confronting him with the eyes of a pythoness. "But for the sake of 'el Señor' I have reclaimed him for the nonce by suffering his attentions. He will now possibly relapse. *Bueno*, let him. I am tired, I tell you, and will see to him."

"Then you will assume the direction of this affair with the ultimate object of—of what, my sister?"

"Of marriage, *simplemente*, my brother. Within the castle, in the chapel, by fair means or by stratagem—I care not which. Have I your submission, brother?"

"Most undoubtedly, oh, my rare sister! Here have you my hand to it. May Cupid attend our endeavours."

"And all the Furies our failures! Proceed, then, on your way with unconcern and leave disaffection to me. I will see to it. To-morrow you will seek every opportunity to engage the attention of the maid. I will do the same as regards the youth. In the evening we will give a special entertainment in their honor, and at this same hour you will attend me here to report progress. Good-night, my brother!"

There was almost a kindly light in her inscrutable eyes as he bent to kiss her hand with all the courtliness of the grandee; but it vanished with his withdrawal from the room, and in its place came back the wreakful fires of the wandering race.

She paused for some seconds, listening to the sound of his receding footsteps, and then, throwing a heavy caped cloak over her ample shoulders, she glided softly from the room, and in a very short space of time had crossed the courtyard in the shadow cast by the westering moon.

At the portcullis entrance she was confronted by the motionless figure of the attendant, who, evidently used to the vagaries of his mysterious mistress, at once opened a small wicket door in the ponderous barriers and bowed her out in respectful silence.

Arrived on the terrace she stayed her feet for some moments to glance up at the moonlit battlements of her feudal home with a long-drawn and tender sigh.

"There is no light in his room. He sleeps—*mi querido!* If thoughts may take to themselves the aery shapes of living bodies, oh, enter, then, upon the beams of yon love-compelling orb and usher in my image to him in his dreams!"

Passing into the avenue, and proceeding rapidly and silently along its sombre aisle, she paused before the gatekeeper's lodge at its extreme end, and tapped gently upon the door.

It was opened, almost immediately, by the hoary Breconridge, who, without betraying the least surprise on his rugged features, drew his heels together, in the approved formal salute of the old soldier, and then stood with bowed head at respectful attention.

"I am pleased to see you so alert, my old friend," she commenced, with a smile of extreme graciousness. "The events of this evening have possibly pointed to the necessity for it. Listen to me. It is my wish, until further notice, that my English visitors, as also el Señor Suarez and the Doña Mercedes, shall not leave the castle precincts without my sanction given to you beforehand, either by word of mouth or in my writing. Do you understand me?"

The mute bowed in token of his having comprehended the duty.

"Then, further, that no letters, on any plea, shall be forwarded by the post that do not bear my superscription."

Again did the old major-domo bend his head in respectful and solemn silence.

"There will be an exception, of course, in the case of Mr. Lovell. I wish to see him to-morrow at this midnight hour. He will find me in attendance within the avenue. Pray you convey my desire to him in writing when he passes. Now retire to your rest and see that these my orders are closely adhered to in every detail. There is my hand."

A gleam of pleasure came over the weather-beaten features of the old retainer as he raised the soft, bejewelled fingers to his speechless lips, and then with his form erect and his hand at salute, he watched her as she entered the avenue and disappeared within the shade of its trees.

CHAPTER VII.

"O, WORLD OF ALL OUTDURING PERFIDY!"

Awakened from dreams of sweetest trend by the outside clamour of rook and daw, the flood of mellow autumn light that entered the heavy transomed window of the spacious sleeping apartment and through the open casement with the morning air, the pungent balm of water-lily and jasmine, young Darley sprang from his bed, and rubbing his eyes with an exclamation of surprise, hastened to the nearest window to reconnoiter the position and collect his scattered wits.

The morning sun had already drawn up in long fleecy rolls the dews of the night, and from a point above the hills was touching the green and sear of the wooded park and upland forest with tender sloping rays of gold.

"Rufina!"

We regret to say that it was the first word—the key to the situation—that escaped his lips, as he turned away from the prospect with a sigh of contrition (his betrothed's due) and proceeded to dress for the day. Passing with silent foot along a corridor with clearstoried windows overlooking the grand hall, and down a massive oaken staircase of ample breadth and wanton sweep, he found himself in the room within which her ladyship's portrait was displayed. Yet, scarcely trusting himself to again cast eyes on it, he hurried through the remembered way to the postern door, and so through the main gateway into the castle grounds.

On the terrace, much to his surprise, he encountered the Doña Mercedes. She was proceeding from the direction of the avenue, and was, to all appearance, in anything but the best of humours.

But her shrewish features cleared in response to his hearty "good-morning," and as she eyed his frank young face and handsome mien she more than half-regretted that the ill chance of a foreign idiom debarred her from entering into a conversation with him.

"Good-morning, Señor Darley," she replied at a venture in Castilian. "And where will you be proceeding so very early in the day?"

He took in the meaning of her accompanying gesture without apparent difficulty, and replied with a smile as he pointed in the direction of the lower park——

"To the village, Miss del Monte, for a jolly good spin before breakfast."

"Ah, the Villa—*el pueblo.* I see," she observed with a look so full of hidden meaning that the youth was quite at a loss what to imagine by it, and his perplexity was redoubled by the fierce little laugh by which it was followed.

"Go on your way, Señor, *con Dios*, and may you experience better luck in the venture than I have done. *Hasta la vista!*"

She left him with the curtest of nods to pursue his way, and disappeared into the castle like some black-eyed little harridan of fairy lore.

"What a very extraordinary woman!" he mused, as he stood gazing up at the wide expanse of wall and turret. "I wonder if they are all like her in Spain. It has been a novel experience, and I should much wish to know what Marion thinks of it all. The poor child, I am afraid I went a little too far last night—or was it the Burgundy?" he added, as he entered the avenue with a serious brow and thoughtful stride. "What a fool a man may make of himself, to be sure, in the presence of a seductive woman and amidst romantic surroundings! And yet! Ah me! what a divine creature! Never mind, my little Marion, I will atone for it all at our first meeting—although, upon my life, I thought on one or two occasions you more than reciprocated the attentions of that dark-faced Don, her brother. Hullo! what is this? Now may all the fiends of lower Sheol take the place and the savage who has done this!"

The exclamation was called forth by the shattered condition of the two bicycles which lay against the wall of the lodge—their tyres cut to pieces, the spokes removed and bent, and the frames disintegrated in the most exhaustively destructive manner.

"Who has done this? Is this your handiwork, you thundering old scoundrel?" he enquired in angry tones of the imperturbable Breconridge, who had emerged from the lodge and was contemplating his annoyance with hardly suppressed satisfaction.

In answer to the fiery appeal he pointed to his vacant chaps, and taking a memorandum book from his pocket, hastily scribbled a few words in it, and presented it in triumph to the indignant youth.

"What is the meaning of this: 'By order of Lady Diarrogh, all bicycles found within the grounds are to be destroyed, and the riders ejected'? Indeed! then that will account, I suppose, for last night's outrage? Very good, my Lady Diarrogh, that settles it. We shall not remain one hour longer in this inhospitable—this barbarous place!"

Without venturing another word, scarcely trusting himself in the transport of passion into which this wanton destruction had thrown him, he turned and strode up the avenue in a towering rage, fully intent on calling his fair hostess to account for the damage.

From the narrow window of her bed-chamber in the Knight's Tower, Marion Wilton, surveying the beauties of the landscape with rapturous eye, caught sight of his figure as it emerged into the bright sunshine on the terrace, and with a slight cry of pleasure and a wave of her tiny laced handkerchief in delighted recognition she retired in haste to greet him on his entry to the castle.

At the foot of the staircase leading from the tower she was, however, intercepted by the expectant Don Domingo, who, advancing hat in hand, with a profound bow of old-world, not to say antique, courtesy, enquired of her how she had slept after the fatigues of the previous day; and then, emboldened by the innocent candour of her reply, begged of her the extreme felicity of escorting her through the castle rooms.

"But I was on my way to meet Mr. Darley, Don Domingo," she protested, with the sweetest expression of embarrassment on her child-face imaginable. "For he is just about to enter the castle."

"*Bueno*, Señorita, we shall then duly encounter him in the corridor on our way. That is, of course," he added, with a calculative look in his dark eyes, "unless he has already fallen in with my sister, who but this moment has left the castle to take the morning air."

His perfidy was sufficiently rewarded by the look of deep chagrin that appeared in her soft eyes, and the gradual paling of the dimpled cheeks.

"Your sister is very kind—and very beautiful, Don Domingo," she observed, with a slight tremor of voice, scarcely knowing, in her heart's distress, what to say in reply to the insinuation—put to her in the way of query.

"Not more beautiful, by any means, than yourself, Miss Wilton," he boldly ventured, as his eyes held hers with an expression of the most ardent admiration.

She met the look with the quiet unconcern of maidenly innocence.

"You must not say that, Don Domingo, or I shall be very cross with you; for you know I am not beautiful as your sister Lady Diarrogh is."

"Possibly so, Señorita, in the eyes of those who can not discriminate. To me it is otherwise revealed. Ah me! but I am the most wretched of men."

"Really, Don Domingo, you alarm me," she exclaimed, with genuine distress; for he had won her quick sympathies by sheer courtesy of manner. "You would have had me believe this of you last night also; but I did not see why you should be in any way wretched, surrounded as you are by all that a man can wish for in this romantic old castle. What can it be then? Oh, tell me, and I will assist you if I can."

"I am in love, Señorita—hopelessly, desperately, absolutely!"

"Why then, Señor, you should have every reason not to be wretched!"

"How, Señorita, when this tender regard meets with no return?"

"Nay, but it must—it shall," she exclaimed, with all the impetuosity of her bright nature. "I will see her myself and intercede for you, as once I did for my poor brother, who is dead, and succeeded."

"I fear me it will be useless, Miss Wilton—although I may perhaps avail myself of your generous offer," he remarked with a sigh, as he bent his head aside in mute wonder at the pure spirit of this maid, who could not, of her innocence, divine his meaning.

"Come, come, then Señor, you must in the meanwhile be more cheerful!" she urged, with a winsome smile, as she took his arm and suffered him to conduct her along the gloomy apartments of the castle. "Remember, I am at your service whenever it pleases you to scold, or coax, or tease this young lady into a sense of her duty. Now please to forget her for the moment and show me the pictures. Who is that kindly-faced old gentleman opposite in foreign uniform—I like him, for he resembles my dear father, whom I adore?"

"That, Señorita, is Don Balefred Diarrogh, my lady's husband, who is dead."

"Poor lady, how she must grieve at the loss. His very hair of silken gray is like my father's—I could stroke it!"

"He will, in the spirit, be pleased at having evoked so sincere a testimony of regard. Tell me, Señorita, when do you propose to leave us—I trust not for very many days; your presence has so much contributed to our happiness?"

"Thank you, sir. When Evelyn and your sister desire it. Personally, I have begged my father to sanction my stay for as long a period as Evelyn may wish. I leave everything to Evelyn," she added, as a pretty flush mantled on her fair cheeks.

"You trust him then most unreservedly, Miss Wilton—this Señor Darley?"

"Now, of course I do, you most whimsical of men!" she replied, with a merry laugh at the lugubrious expression that accompanied this further attempt to arouse her jealousies. "I have known Evelyn for years—indeed, ever since we were both little tiny mites, so high, and went cowslipping together on the fens. Why, look! There they are."

She pointed to where, in the deep recess of a distant oriel, her hostess and young Darley stood in close and to all appearance earnest converse.

"Hush! come away, Miss Wilton," he broke in hurriedly, as he essayed to draw her aside. "It can not be the young Darley. They are domestics possibly! See—he holds her hand. Oh, thou world, thou world of all outduring perfidy!"

"Nay, you must not hinder me thus, Don Domingo!" she exclaimed, with unwonted dignity. "These are not domestics! See, they turn this way! It is Evelyn and your sister, Lady Diarrogh, and now they have seen us and are approaching!"

Dear little child-heart! What a pang the effort at dissimulation must have brought to it as she greeted the advancing couple with a cheerful smile.

"Of course I have accepted your apologies for the abruptness, you impulsive, hot-headed boy," Doña Rufina was saying to the disconcerted youth as they drew near. "It was assuredly most unjustifiable on Breconridge's part, and highly exasperating to you without doubt. But I will issue immediate orders to have the machines replaced by new ones. Nay, I will hear of no denial! It is my wish. Good-morning, Miss Wilton, and you, my brother. See, Mr. Darley," she remarked, in a whispered aside to the latter, "how engaging a couple! It might be the pretty maid Robsart and her Leicester of Kenilworth, incarnate!"

He had fain to acknowledge the truth of the comparison, though the thoughts it called up in his mind were only too apparent in the air of coldness with which he responded to his fair cousin's greeting—a greeting no less reserved than his own. But whatever these impressions may have been, and however eagerly they may have wished to seek a mutual explanation, the opportunity was not vouchsafed to them by Rufina del Montefuego or her brother as they escorted the couple to the great hall, where, at the sound of the gong, the numerous house-party were already foregathering for the morning meal.

CHAPTER VIII.

SUAREZ INTERCEPTS THE POSTAL MESSENGER.

Whatever conclusions the assembled cavaliers might have drawn from the events of the preceding evening, they permitted no evidence of their former contumeliousness to assert itself at the breakfast table; and pleased though " my lady," at the head of the board, could not help feeling thereat, she was too well conversant with the feline propensities of the plot-loving Iberian to be at all satisfied with this *volte-face* on the part of her countrymen.

Nevertheless, their sudden assumption of amiability served her purpose in dispelling any feeling of embarrassment which the occurrences of that morning had engendered in the mind of young Darley and Miss Wilton.

The latter, with an undefinable feeling of pique at her lover's flagrant disloyalty—a sentiment persistently fostered by the insinuations of the subtle Domingo—had sought his eyes shyly from time to time with the nearest approach they were capable of to a mild indignation. But the young man, his ears and eyes at the entire disposition of his fascinating *vis-à-vis*, seemed, whether of purpose or not, to have ignored her very presence; an added baseness of betrayal that was amply sufficient excuse for the nettled little lady entering into an equal flirtation with the delighted del Montefuego. And so, we regret to say, matters with them went on from bad to worse.

To the general clatter of the conversation there was none who contributed so vivaciously and indiscriminately as the little Doña Mercedes. Precluded from discourse with Miss Wilton and young Darley by her lingual disabilities, she divided her attentions amongst the balance of the company, and treated them to an incessant flow of small talk that would have been highly diverting had it not been a little hysterical.

The painter, Suarez, had likewise apparently recovered from his previous moroseness, and from his position at the end of the table waged colloquial war on all and sundry who might choose to try conclusions with him.

From a social (if superficial) point of view, therefore, it must be conceded that the morning meal was an unqualified success.

That function over, and the assembled company duly notified by Lady Rufina of her intention of giving an entertainment that evening, Don Domingo carried his fair young guest off to the castle grounds, accompanied by the omniscient Doña Mercedes, whose elfish delight at his discomfiture was only exceeded by the chagrin her enforced presence caused him to feel.

For the first time since they had entered the hall, Evelyn Darley condescended to bestow a glance of recognition on his cousin as she was about to retire; and touched by the evident symptoms of distress on that self-betraying little face, he was about to hasten to her side, when the slight pressure of a hand on his arm, and a murmured "You will come with me, of course, will you not, Evelyn?" made him dismiss the better impulse and turn instead with an acquiescent smile to the syren beside him.

"I am about to bestow a final sitting to Señor Suarez, Mr. Darley," she continued in louder tones for the benefit of the artist. "The interval will not be unfavourable to conversation, which will serve most excellently to pass the time. What say you, Don Diego? Shall we proceed to the work at once? The Señor Darley's presence will, I am sure, not interrupt the progress of your brush."

"But consider, my lady!" protested the painter, with scarcely veiled annoyance. "I shall not then be favoured with the advantage of that repose of feature so essential to my poor efforts!"

"Nay, you forget, *amigo*, that the face has been completed. There only remains the last few touches to the dress. Have the goodness to conduct us to the studio, Señor."

"But, my dear lady——"

"It is extremely impolite to speak in the presence of a guest in another tongue, Señor Suarez," she interrupted, in low tones, as she turned on him with that majesty of command she knew so well how to assume. "But if you have these fears for the result of your work so truly at heart, and will persist in demonstrating them, I shall be compelled to send my maid to you with the robe, to which, together with the chair, you will be at liberty in my absence to devote your undivided attention!"

Never was a presuming lover's *congé* delivered with so unmistakable an emphasis of voice and inevitableness of glance. He stood before her for some seconds literally swaying under the stress of feeling her words had brought to him—his face denuded of all colour, and his eyes fixed upon hers with alternate glances of angry incredibility and piteous appeal.

His obvious distress of mind was not lost on the Englishman, who now for the first time seemed to discern how matters were trending between the two, as, with an uncomfortable feeling at heart, he gave Lady Diarrogh his arm and followed the quiescent artist to the room which had been used as a studio.

His meditative manner and the cause from which it had sprung were not lost on the prescient lady of the castle, and she proceeded to visit her further displeasure on the head of the unfortunate artist by addressing her conversation wholly to young Darley, and only replying at intervals to the former when the nature of his work demanded it, and then only in the tolerant manner of an employer addressing herself to a privileged tradesman.

At the conclusion of the sitting she arose with a charming affectation of languid indifference, and with a nod of dismissal left the room with her guest.

No sooner had the door closed upon them than the wretched young man, letting his brush and palette fall to the ground with a gesture of utter despair, buried his face in his hands, and gave vent to a storm of passionate sobs. It was of a verity a pitiable sight, and one that would have possibly touched the heart of any other less hardened by a newly-conceived passion than Rufina del Montefuego.

A full hour went by, and was loudly proclaimed by the castle clock, before he ventured to recover himself from the huddled attitude of inconsolable grief into which he had sunk, and when he arose to his feet with tear-soaked eyes and swollen features all that picturesque cast of beauty for which he was noted had utterly disappeared, and was replaced by the expression of an almost Satanic hatred. But this in turn was soon to be succeeded by one of quiet resolution, as he went over to a window and seated himself by an escritoire to write.

And, further, what he there indited was, to all appearance, well thought out before it was committed to paper, for he paused at frequent intervals in the flow of the sentences to pass his hand over his moist brow and gaze over the tops of the distant elms.

"There, my Lady Diarrogh!" he muttered at last, as he sealed and addressed the envelope and dropped it into the pocket of his jacket. "It is the obvious if vulgar return for this contumely towards one who would have willingly suffered the torture of the rack for the recompense of your love. It now but remains to have this information of your schemes transmitted to the Government with the utmost despatch, and, that successfully accomplished, to notify you of my desire to relieve you of my presence within the castle."

He left the room and the building with the quiet stealth of one on whose face the still visible traces of the moral storm might serve to awaken suspicion and distrust.

"Stay! *Caramba,* I had forgotten!" he ejaculated with a gesture of despair, as he paused on the avenue within sight of the lodge. "What is this Mercedes has told me this morning? No exit, and no letters from the castle, without my lady's passport in writing! *Santa Maria,* what a demoness revealed is this woman! *Bueno,* then I must succeed by some other and more subtle means in evading this restriction."

At this juncture, having espied the approaching figures of Don Domingo del Montefuego and his two companions as they proceeded up the avenue, he turned off by a side-path towards a grove of rhododendrons hard by, from behind which he was in a position to command a view of the lodge gates, while remaining hidden to the trio on their way to the castle.

"It is about the hour for the midday post," he mused, as he consulted his watch impatiently, "and I shall see the postal messenger enter the lodge gates for the letter bag without removing from my position here. Now, let me carefully construe the position that is before me. He will, after delivering and receiving his letters, pass along by the road that winds directly under the castle walls away yonder to the left. *Bueno*, I shall be there in readiness to intercept him. The letter, which is of ample dimensions, shall be tied thus to this stone of cylindrical shape and thrown over the wall to fall before his eyes on the highway. It is addressed and franked, and it will only remain for him to convey it to the village post office."

The sound of the postman's horn outside the lodge gates here warned him of the arrival of the moment for immediate action.

He watched the gate open and the interchange of letters take place between the major-domo and the messenger, and then, making a hurried mental calculation of the time that should elapse before the latter reached a certain point beyond the boundary wall of the castle, he proceeded swiftly, and under every available cover, across the park to carry out his plan of interception.

As he did so the major-domo, pipe in mouth, hastened after the postman into the main road and whistled the departing official back to him. When the latter reached his side he pointed to the unlit bowl of the pipe, slapped his pockets, shook his head in the direction of the castle, and was about to chalk up "match" on the wall for the benefit of the obtuse rustic, when the latter, divining his meaning with a sympathetic grin, laid down his bag, and went through all his pockets in careful search for the necessary vesuvian. It was eventually discovered (the last of its fellows, as it ever is) within the lining of his trousers pocket, and, having been struck and carefully fostered within their mutual palms, the consummation so devoutly wished by the old soldier was attained, and the postman, with shouldered bag, was at liberty to proceed on his rounds.

In the meanwhile the youthful Diego Suarez had arrived at the calculated point of operations, and having listened intently for any sound of movement on the other side of the high wall, was almost immediately rewarded by a footfall on the hard road—almost in front of where he was standing. There was not a moment to be lost, then. He threw the missile with its attachment well over the stonework, and without waiting for any results that might reach his ears, he went off at a rapid pace in the direction of the lodge.

"Now, my friend," said he, as he strode along over the leaf-strewn turf, "you will do either one of two things. You will proceed to post it without question, or you will return with it to the lodge. Very good; then I shall be at the lodge, engaged with this mastiff Englishman, and if you should adopt the latter course I shall take it back from your hand with a suitable excuse. To-night she shall in any event be acquainted with my intention—her portrait being completed—to return to my home in Burgos. She will believe all to be well, for I shall not in any way betray my feelings to her, and she will probably entrust me with the delivery of those last despatches which shall acquaint el Señor Don Carlos of the disposition of the Biscayan forces. But they shall go—these treasonable evidences—to Madrid instead. Now, may all the Fates prosper me in my designs."

The Fates had apparently begun only too well to favour them, for, during the half-hour's wait in the lodge, on the plea of fatigue, he was undisturbed by the re-admission of the postman, and so went off to the castle to ingratiate himself into the confidences of the conspirators with a view to their lending their sanction to his departure from Tarnworth on the following day.

CHAPTER IX.

MISS MERCEDES SPEAKS HER MIND.

Wearied, and a little frightened, by the importunities of the ardent del Montefuego, which even the presence of Doña Mercedes could not wholly repress, and burning for an opportunity of meeting her cousin and taxing him on his recent cavalier treatment of her, Marion Wilton, on reaching the castle and without a word of excuse, suddenly left Don Domingo to the tender mercies of his fiancée, and set off in quest of Evelyn Darley.

Immediately the countenance of the little Spanish Señorita underwent so prodigious a change that the unfortunate Domingo, but for the indecorum of the thing, would certainly have taken to his heels and fled.

"You appear to have forgotten yourself, Señor—or me—or both, that you should have so scandalously conducted yourself in my presence, before our compatriots; ay, and before the eyes of the very menials of my cousin's house!"

Her indignation had brought her to a full stop, literally agasp for breath, and choking with her emotions.

Don Domingo took in the position at a glance. He had to some extent been prepared for it, and had made up his mind as to his attitude. But her violence came as an unpleasant surprise to him, scaring him not a little at first, though nerving him in the end to break off relations that, from a matrimonial view-point, augured so ominously for a future of storm and stress.

"*Caramba*, but have you not forgotten yourself, my cousin?" said he, with studied calmness, as he stood facing her coldly in the vestibule. "Remember that we are even now under the surveillance of those very menials you have named, and that it will not mend matters to persist in so vulgar a display of asperity."

"Vulgar! *Madre de Dios!* This to me, Señor? Oh, it is beyond tolerance! Domingo, have you then taken leave of your senses—have you forgotten?"

"I have forgotten nothing, Mercedes," he replied, deliberately. "It is deplorable, it is true—this development unforeseen. But, *querida mia*, it is a decree of the Fates that can not now be evaded; and regrettable—inexcusable as it may seem to you to be in its perverseness, we must learn, Señorita, to forget—possibly to forgive——"

"To forget—never. To forgive—never, Señor, in this world! So, then it would appear that you are infatuated beyond reclaim by the machinations of this doll-faced chit of an English girl? Do you not know, then, that she is betrothed—that *we* are betrothed? Have you no consideration, no shame, Señor?"

She had thrown all maidenly reserve to the winds, and, with his arm tightly grasped, had hissed the words in his face with eyes of fire, and lips parched and contorted with fury.

"You disarrange my surtout, Señorita. Have the goodness to desist. I have no wish to quarrel with you, Heaven only knows; but you are presuming too much on my tolerance, and I must again demand of you to cease these idle tirades."

"Señor del Montefuego, you are a coward!"

"Morally, Señorita, possibly I am. I regret it—deplore it, wishing sincerely it were not so. But what would you in the circumstances?"

"Bah! Out upon you, cur. You are execrable to me beyond the reach of language! Our relations shall from this moment cease. There! and may my curse alight upon you with it!"

She had been tugging furiously at her left hand the while, and now, with the malediction, hurled the ring full in his face. It struck him on the forehead, leaving a livid mark, and then rolled slowly away under a distant cabinet. His pallid features flushed under the insult, and his hands clenched involuntarily; but he recovered himself by a supreme effort as he remarked with all his former frigidness of manner—

"Better that the dismissal should have come from you, Señorita. *Bueno,* so be it then. There is nothing more to be said."

"Look to yourself, del Montefuego!" she cried, in a voice that was so full of menace that it made him suddenly turn to her again as he was about to leave the room. "Ah, coward, you had forgotten! My brother, Don Fabricio, shall call you to a bitter account for this!"

"I repeat to you again, Señorita, that if under the unhappy circumstances I may have played the moral poltroon, yet am I no coward."

"We shall see, Señor. Yet, mark you, I shall not be idle. They shall be warned, these *Inglès.* I have not been blind to my lady's intentions. Reflect! if I am temporarily placed under pecuniary obligations to Lady Diarrogh, there are limits to gratitude when liberty of movement ceases, and Mercedes del Monte becomes common to her ladyship's espials. I shall now immediately proceed to my brother, Don Fabricio, and acquaint him of this insult."

"*Caramba,* madam, I fear him not! Let him come on of God's name!"

He turned and left her without another word; and, with a cry of impotent rage, she sank into a chair in a corner of the room and sobbed the hours away in silence.

She was aroused eventually by the sound of footsteps, and on looking up saw the youthful figure of the artist Suarez standing before her, and regarding her with the first display of genuine sympathy to which she had been treated for many a day.

"Mercedes!"

"Diego!"

"Don Domingo has been with you, then?"

"He has, and it is all now of the past."

"Come," said he, taking her by the arm gently, and leading her away. "Come into the open air, for I have a great deal to tell you before I leave you to-morrow—possibly for ever!"

She looked up at him with an expression of bewilderment and surprise, but suffered him, nevertheless, to escort her from the room.

Marion Wilton had, in the meantime, proceeded through the suite of rooms at the end of the corridor, in search of Evelyn; and, finding them unoccupied, had passed from the studio into a second lobby hewn apparently out of the solid outer wall of the castle, and, like the first, adorned with a miscellaneous collection of armoury, interspersed with portraits of bygone Diarroghs in mail, in velvets, ruffed and laced; and all, as it seemed to the distressed maid, with eyes levelled upon her, and angrily observant of her every movement.

Several times in her progress she had come upon a domestic, silent, contained, and obviously of foreign nationality; but they had slunk away at her approach, like familiars of the castle, giving her no opportunity for enquiry as to Lady Diarrogh's whereabouts. This studied avoidance, which had obtained ever since her arrival, helped to increase her trepidation and her dislike of the place, its people, and all their ways. Indeed, she felt at times in her distress and amid the chill gloom of these vasts that she could almost have indulged in a good cry if it had not been that she was among aliens, and felt that the national character must be upheld at all hazards. Besides, what would Evelyn have thought of her as contrasted with the self-possessed creature who already seemed to have monopolised all his attention?

As she was hurrying along the corridor the sound of music, soft, plaintive, and distant, came gradually upon her ears; and seeing a low pointed door on her right partially open, through which the sounds appeared to enter, she moved it upon its massive wrought hinges and stepped timidly within.

She saw at a glance that she had entered the ancient chapel of the castle, and that the musical sounds were proceeding from an organ placed within a gallery surmounting the lower end of the nave.

The construction of the sacred edifice, although in miniature, was of truer form than that of many another and more imposing place of worship. Nave, aisles, transept, and ambulatories were all there, in happy proportion—shafted and groined, spandrelled and carved by the unerring hands of craftsmen, now as utterly forgotten as the divine art that inspired them. And through the stained glass in the rare old windows the dappled light fell prettily in upon the mosaic flooring, the quaint oakwork, and the recumbent effigies of old-world Diarroghs upstaring in stony silence at the tattered and dusty bannerols on high.

The place, the music, and the silence of peace they suggested came as a grateful relief to the vexed feelings of the young girl; and closing the heavy portal softly behind her, she stole on tip-toe along the transept into which she had entered, and seating herself in a pew directly under the organ-loft, gave free rein to her thoughts while listening to the sweet harmonies from above.

The music itself was continued in the same subdued strain, as though the executant were playing to his own thoughts, and in some fear that his performance should disturb the meditations of others. And as she sat there apart, her face supported by her hands, and her large soft eyes staring up at the grey vaults above her, the mellow notes of the ancient reeds under the deft manipulation of the invisible performer seemed to enter her full heart like the whispered condolence of pitying angels. And when, as the modulated harmonies of the mass movement swelled in volume till they reached a climax of tremulous and passionate appeal, to die away in closing chords, so significant of a peace eternal, the unhappy child, her home, her father, Evelyn, and her miserable position so vividly brought before her by this tender ordeal of music, gave way at last to her pent-up feelings, and, shrinking into a corner of the old pew, broke into a passionate fit of weeping.

The intense quiet that followed upon the cessation of the music was broken by the noise of the closing keyboard and the movement of feet on the stairs leading from the loft. They came down slowly and very hesitatingly, those feet, as though their possessor were infirm of body and doubted their failing powers. Presently the entrance to the staircase was darkened and a very old man—a priest—with shaven features of ascetic cast, large kindly blue eyes, and long white hair of a silky flossiness, stood in the body of the chapel, his small, spare figure bent with years, and his scant breath going and coming with painful frequency.

As he stood there contemplating the array of empty seats with an expression of sorrow upon his benevolent face his eyes fell upon a little head of golden curls amidst which the straggling sunbeams were lovingly playing, and with a start of surprise he hastily assumed his spectacles and approached the object a little nearer to assure himself that he was in the presence of a mortal, and not some revealed Saint Dolorosa, as the good man had at first surmised.

Having convinced himself of its mundane attributes, and further noted that the stranger was a young lady—a mere child, and in evident distress—he produced a snuff-box from his vest pocket, and applied himself to its contents in meditative silence before he ventured to address her.

When he did so it was in tones of the sweetest cadence—so like the music that had but recently appealed to her inmost heart.

"*Benedicte*, my daughter! You are troubled in mind. Come, let it be my duty to assuage this sorrow."

She looked up at him dazedly and with swimming eyes for a second, and then laid her forehead down again on the wooden sill in her previous attitude of grief without being able to utter a word.

"Come, come, my child!" he again ventured as he softly entered the pew, and, seating himself by her side, placed a thin, transparent hand caressingly on her head. "Listen, and I will address you in the English tongue, for I see you are of that nationality. Look up at me, and speak to me without fear, for I am an old man, and one ordained of God to intercede with Him on behalf of His sorrowing children."

His words, his touch, and the depth of tender pity in the old voice had something of the soothing effect of the parent towards the child; and she ceased to weep as she turned to him, and, with a grateful smile that came as a gleam of sunlight through an April shower, thanked him for his solicitude.

"I have been very foolish—Father," she said, with an heroic effort to repress the rising sob. "Very—very foolish. It must have been the strangeness of the place—the peace—the—the—sweetness of the music above all, that made me forget myself."

The old man's eyes beamed with pleasure upon her at this artless tribute to his recent performance.

"So you are fond of music, my daughter. Very well, I will play to you again some day, when you will promise me to refrain from weeping."

"Then it was you who played? I am sure it is very kind of you, and if you will do so again I will promise you to be so good and listen to you ever so quietly."

"Ah, that is better, my child! And now I am sure we shall get on famously together. For you are of the few children in these degenerate days whose natural goodness appeals to the sympathies of the aged. I may read that without difficulty in the unspotted purity of those speaking eyes. But why are you here, child? Come, tell me about yourself, without hesitation or reserve, for, believe me, I have taken an exceeding great interest in you."

This she at once proceeded to do, hiding nothing from him in the guilelessness of her young heart, the old man listening with rapt attention to the detailed recital, and, as she concluded, betraying very evident symptoms of deep distress.

"I may not be with you, my child," said he, very earnestly, "to watch over the development of events, for my presence in the drawing-room, or at the table, has long since ceased to be desired; nor am I called into their counsels, as in the lifetime of my Lord Diarrogh. But of this be assured, and I say it with all respect to her ladyship, at whose hands I have ever met with the greatest consideration, the castle of Tarnworth is no fit place for you or your betrothed to be within. Nay, be not alarmed, matters have not yet reached that stage when they may not, even at this hour, be quickly mended. But remember this well, that if at any time you should be in peril of any kind while within these walls, hasten to me here—to Father Benito—in the chapel, and I shall be at hand to render you aid. For myself, I have for many years been in the service of the Montefuego family, and in that position left Spain to follow my lady's fortunes, but, alas! with the stir of recent events, the priest and his offices have been sore neglected, if not utterly discarded, and I live here entirely alone, unnoticed by the family, and apart from the household.

"I would not wish to be disloyal to her ladyship," he hastened to add, "by counselling your immediate departure from hence, but I would be remiss in my duty of shielding you from harm were I to withhold it. You will therefore take the first opportunity this day of seeing your cousin and urging this upon him. If unfortunately he should be obdurate and wish for further information, send him here to me."

She had already started to her feet in dismay, her colour going and coming with her fears, but the old man took her by the hand and gently drew her to the seat at his side.

" Hush, child! you must remain here for a little while longer to recover from your trepidation and compose your features, otherwise your agitation may not escape her ladyship's notice, and she would surmise from whence this perturbation arose."

" Oh, Father Benito, you have awakened my very worst fears. Let me go to him at once! See, I have quite recovered from my agitation, and I will promise you to be most discreet!"

" Nay, nay, you must hear me, child, and be advised! Would you then compromise me?"

" No, indeed no, not for worlds, Father!" she cried, impulsively, as she took his aged hands in hers. " I shall never forget your kindness—never—never, or know how to sufficiently thank you!"

" Let me be in your memory, my child," he said, his eyes moistening and his old voice quavering with feeling. " Let me be in your memory for the short time I shall be here, and in the days when I shall have passed away. For next to the consolation spiritual, what dearer thought is there to the forsaken than to be held in affectionate remembrance by a truly good woman.

There, have you my blessing, daughter! May the weight of sorrow never more find a resting-place on this little head. Come, let us now go up to the organ, and I will play away your fears until it shall be time for you to see your cousin. Yes, child, I will accept of your arm so generously proffered. Come."

CHAPTER X.

THE FÊTE AT TARNWORTH.

The full harvest moon shone down that night upon Tarnworth Castle *en fête*. Never within the memory of its retainers had its old walls echoed to such boisterous peals of merriment. A brilliant supper in the great hall had been followed by music in the drawing-room, to which the guests, one and all, had contributed to the best of their abilities. The *hidalgos*, having perforce to accept a situation that was now to all appearance inevitable, had hastened to make every amend in their power, and as a set-off to their previous gloom were entering heart and soul into the gaieties of the evening. The sadly disproportionate number of gentlemen had debarred them from the pleasures of the *cotillon;* but the deficiency was more than made up for by the universality of the brilliant hostess, who seemed bent that evening on gaining the unqualified good opinion of all and every of these her strangely assorted guests; now bandying jests with the reserved and aged Don Francisco, and the no less venerable Don Saturnino, anon chaffing the youthful Don Urbano and his boon companion Don Santiago over some recent escapade in Madrid, at other times in dulcet tones of implied regret at her recent *gaucherie* imploring the politely obdurate artist Suarez to reconsider his decision to depart from the castle on the following day. Then she would address herself to her brother and Miss Wilton, rallying them gaily, albeit judiciously, yet in terms well calculated to fuel the jealousies of Evelyn Darley, to whom, in turn, she appealed less by word of mouth than by an occasional and half-suppressed sigh, or a look of the tenderest meaning.

The youth, on the other hand, with beating heart and head all adaze with the sweet bewilderment of one in a dream-scene, half dared to challenge the scarcely concealed admiration he read in those Circe-like eyes. All very deplorable from the moralist's point of view, 'tis true, but true nevertheless it was in point of fact, and as such it must stand recorded against him.

At the piano, to the accompaniment of the versatile Urbano y Rodriguez, the enchanting hostess, with the pose of a goddess, had electrified the assembled guests and privileged servants by a series of Gitana airs, sung with a bewitching delivery and intonement worthy of the syrens of fable. In sooth, it was a marvellous performance in its display of passionate fervour, when it is remembered how desperate was the position to which she sought to attain, how impossible the stakes for which she was so recklessly playing, and that it was essayed in the presence of one listener at least who took little pains to conceal her hostility: la Señorita Mercedes del Monte, to wit.

Her brother had also entered into the musical portion of the entertainment with a corresponding assumption of levity, and had sung a canzonet with his cousin, Don Fabricio, with a verve and go that would have astonished the young Englishman all the more had he but known that the two gentlemen were even then pledged to mortal combat as a natural corollary to the affair Mercedes.

One other of that company (we allude to the little English maid) sat distraught and silent, her eyes fixed upon her unobservant lover with an expression of righteous indignation, and the warning words of the good Padre Benito ringing in her ears to the exclusion of Don Domingo's Quixotic personalisms. She had discovered to her consternation that the attentions of her devoted cavalier were a source of unmitigated annoyance to the Andalusian Señorita nearby, and with that intuition, as between woman and woman, she had grasped the whole situation in one instant: his manner towards her, his allusions to a hopeless love, the now apparent truth that the affections of the little Spanish maiden, his cousin, were being trifled with, and that she, Marion Wilton, alone was the innocent cause of all this! The reaction on her feelings was so overwhelming that even the Doña Mercedes, from under her drooping eyelids, could not fail to interpret her open-eyed look of horror, and her slight movement of recoil from the side of the Spaniard at the moment when the facts of the situation came upon her so vividly.

The poor girl had endeavoured upon more than one occasion, during the supper and in the drawing-room, to enlist young Darley's attention, and even to address him on the subject so near to her heart; but on each occasion she had been thwarted by the lynx-like watchfulness of the Doña Rufina and her brother, and a natural sense of the politeness due from a guest restrained her from openly conveying to him her fears—with the certain result of its drawing down upon her not only his ridicule, but the well-deserved reproaches of so indulgent a hostess.

It was left for the wit of the resourceful Doña Mercedes to accomplish that for which this forlorn young maid had so long been pining. And as a means to that end the latter had attached the services of one no less interested than the painter Suarez.

"I would have them meet each other without further delay, Diego," she whispered to the latter during the progress of the music, "but I am debarred by their language from speaking to them. Here have you the opportunity now, while my lady is singing and the English Señor sits alone. Engage him in friendly

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conversation, and bid him if he has any regard for his young countrywoman to grant her some moments' conversation on a matter of great urgency. It will not be necessary to explain. She will do that for us, if I mistake not. You will then proceed to the Señorita Wilton in like manner when Don Domingo goes to the piano, and acquaint her also of this appointment. Haste, *amigo,* you have barely the opportunity! Have no fears, for they will observe the necessary discretion."

Leaning back on her *fauteuil,* and manipulating her fan with well-affected admiration of her cousin's vocal performance, she marked with feelings of exultation the complete success of her co-conspirator's mission. She saw with what genuine friendliness young Darley greeted him, and the slight start and look of anxiety with which the whispered communication had been received.

"*Excellente!*" she murmured, pleasedly. "*Muy bueno, Diego mio!* Your devotion merits a better recognition than it will ever receive at her hands. Now for the Señorita! The Señor del Montefuego has already departed to the piano, to sing to the accompaniment of Don Urbano y Rodriguez. Now would the howlings of all the fiends in purgatory make sweeter music for my ears than thy vile throatings—*picaro! Dios* prosper thee, Diego, in thy errand! He has vacated his seat to the scowling Rufina (who has probably suspected his motive in being there), and has stopped with careless greeting before this Mistress Robsart—I would tear her baby features with these nails, oh, so willingly! Hah! she likewise has heard, and now dissembles her anger, and possibly her joy (for she is, after all, but a woman), at the prospect of meeting her boy-lover, and scolding him into his old servitude. Welcome, Don Diego, for I see you have succeeded to perfection!"

"You have observed correctly, Señorita," he replied with the complacence of gratified malice, "and it now but requires the opportunity to bring this meeting to a head. Personally, I fail to see how it can be practicable."

"*Caramba*, my friend, you are obtuse! The opportunity will present itself in the same manner, *justamente*. On the conclusion of el Señor's song la Señora, his sister, will be unanimously called upon to sing with her brother the favourite duet of Rossini (I will see to that), at the close of which, and during the applause that will follow, the Señor Darley and Miss Wilton will meet and retire. With you, Señor, rests the responsibility of imparting the necessary signal of departure."

And, as they calculated, so events fell out, and favoured the meeting of the youthful couple. For though they were bound by every rule of decorum to listen to the duet to its end, they felt on its termination, and from the look which the artist had transmitted to them, that the psychical moment had at last arrived.

And so they arose, and, approaching one another with constrained greeting, hurriedly left the room together.

The expression of annoyance that appeared on the faces of Doña Rufina and her brother on perceiving that their birds had flown was not lost to the two malcontents, to whom, it is scarcely necessary to add, it imparted the greatest gratification; though they had taken care, by keeping apart and assuming an air of the utmost unconsciousness, that their complicity might not be brought to question.

" Let them go, my brother," said the angry *châtelaine* in an undertone, and with a restraining gesture, as he was about to leave the room in search of the absent couple. " The mistake is for the present irreparable. Let them go—to quarrel as they surely must, and sit you here by my side until I unfold to you my plans for to-morrow's events, which shall decide for the success or failure of our purposes. Our cousin and yonder wretch consummate, Diego, have undoubtedly scored against us in this move; my malisons on him, and her too, the spitfire jade! But it shall be the last. I will have care for that, my hateful friends. Ay, brother, even though I should be forced to put the castle vaults to their ancient uses. Nay, I speak not in vain! "

Perturbed though he was by the unfortunate turn of events, he could not repress the feeling of awed admiration for her determined and magnificent audacity which the threat had evoked, followed as it was by a look of majestic wrath, such as sovereignty itself might have cowered under.

"You have my sympathies, sister," said he, with a reproving look nevertheless. "But you will please remember that Don Fabricio, her brother, would scarcely tolerate such extreme methods of repression. It would be impossible."

"Let him object," she retorted, with superb contempt in the utterance. "Has he not appealed to the sword in this affair of Mercedes?"

"But the encounter is deferred until we meet on Spanish soil, and——"

"But it may not be deferred, if events should hasten the meeting," she interrupted, with significant emphasis. "For we are here, to all intents and purposes, on Spanish territory, while I am mistress of this castle and the tongues within it. So unless you fear——"

"Sister!"

"Hah! you are touched, then. Good, my brother; I know that you are no coward. Hear me, therefore; and, oh! ye spirits of good and evil, hearken unto me also, for the moment has come when I shall need all your aids. To-morrow this youth—this Evelyn—to whom, my brother, it should be apparent to you I have devoted all my life's great affection, ay, and should it be necessary, life itself. This youth—the fateful one, so truly predicted of Lovell, the gipsy—will declare his equal passion for me; for I have seen it in his eyes, and know that it *must* be so. Oh, say that it *is* so, my brother, for you have seen, and may divine me this!"

"Hush, sister! you must maintain a condition of calm," he urged in a hurried whisper, as she appeared, under the stress of her feelings, to be on the point of throwing her usual discretion aside. "Be of good heart, for I have not been unobservant of this young man's demeanour in your presence, and would more than marvel if he, or any other man, were so insensate, so incapable of love, as not to be won over to you, even from the side of the little *angelsito*, whose regard (with all deference to you, my superb sister) is so hopelessly wasted upon him—a regard which I, with equal resolution, have dedicated my life to attain. Pray you, now, proceed with more discreetness."

"You have right, my brother. We have hitherto no reason to suspect that we have lost ground; and whatever may pass between Señor Darley and Miss Wilton be assured it will be known to me to-night, and, if necessary, it will be remedied before they retire to rest. To-morrow, I have told you, he will, he must, declare his better regard for me; and, madly impossible as it may appear to you, their engagement will be broken off, and we shall be married in the Chapel of Our Lady by the Padre Benito!"

"And the Señorita?"

"I care not. She must learn to acquiesce in the inevitable, and make amends by bestowing her hand on my brother, whom she appears to me to have exceptionally favoured with her attentions. Both parties being consentant, their families will doubtless see fit to acknowledge the situation. In any event, I tell you, I care not! Should she be obdurate, *bueno*, she will be at liberty to leave the castle and return to her home. For me, it is my intention to withdraw with my husband from Tarnworth, and for ever to leave the field of politics to others more fitted to engage in its mediocrities. You look astonished, my brother! Ah! so might I have felt and looked but the day before yesterday; but this love is a greater factor in a woman's life than the fate of kings!"

"Heaven prosper you in your undertaking, my sister!" he muttered, with great fervency, "and Heaven also put it into this young girl's pure heart to listen favourably to me! It would indeed be a happy consummation; for I likewise, under the spell of the little witch's enchantments, would fain cry a halt to these interminable plottings. But, in the event of absolute failure, what then, my sister?"

"Silence, my brother!" she answered him abruptly—her hand grasping his fingers tightly, and the great dark eyes fixed on vacancy with a wildness of stare that caused him involuntarily to shrink from her. "Hush, you have asked me that question before, and you have been answered. I will wait till that moment shall arrive, and should it come—*bueno*, the spirits will guide me! But, see, a domestic approaches, and would deliver to me a letter!"

"It is from Breconridge," she added, when she had broken the seal and read the contents, "and informing me of Lovell's presence in the avenue with important despatches from abroad. *Caramba!* it should be of great urgency, then, for he is some hours before his time! Remain here, my brother, and keep the assembly in humour as best you may, for I shall not be long detained."

Dismissing the servant, she quietly withdrew, and in a very short space of time had reached the avenue by the lodge gates.

As she neared the trysting-place the tall figure of a man moved out from behind the trunk of a gigantic witch-elm, behind which he had been concealed, and stood with bared head in an open moonlit space waiting her approach.

He was a man of advanced years, powerfully built, and standing above six feet in height—of swarthy features, with large, dark eyes, and well-defined upper lids, and a head of grey bushy hair that had once apparently been of the darkest shade. He wore a scarlet neckcloth knotted loosely at the throat, and was clad in a brown jacket and vest of well-worn velveteen, with nether garments of gaitered corduroy. A splendid specimen, truly, of the gipsy headman, without any of that slouch of gait or furtiveness of look so often the attributes of that remarkable people. Yet, though his attitude betokened deference to the mistress of Tarnworth, there was something in the resolute gaze of the well-opened and expressive eyes that certainly implied no condition of vassalage to her imperious will.

"You are early, Lovell," she observed, after she had greeted him with more friendliness of manner than was her wont to her inferiors in station. "You have received very important papers, then, or you would not have urged this meeting before the pre-appointed time?"

"Yes, my lady, you have judged correctly," he quietly answered, as he noted and read, with the unerring instinct of his race, her flushed cheeks and the new light that was in her eyes. "Despatches have been handed to me only this morning, and from a new and quite unexpected quarter. I had thought to keep them until midnight, and present them to you then; but, on second consideration, I felt that they ought to be placed in your hands at once. Here, my lady, you have them as I received them."

She took the packet from him with an impatient movement, and thrust it in the pocket of her robe.

"There, let it bide its turn! I am tired—so very tired of these interminable embassies. Oh, Lovell, it was not for this I wished to see you! It was for something else far nearer and dearer to my heart! Lovell, he has come!"

"Indeed, my lady!"

"Oh, do not dissemble thus before me—you who possess the power to read our hearts and divine the inscrutable future! I tell you again that he of whom you foretold me is here—at this moment—within the compass of these walls; and that, as you have forecast it, so, alas! it has come to pass."

He stood with bent head, holding the hand she had laid upon his in her terrible earnestness, and gazing down sorrowfully into the magnificent eyes that were upturned to his with almost a pleading expression. "I am grieved to hear it—daughter; for I may call you by the name that denominates you of our blood. Is it not foretold that this first absolute love shall be debarred——"

"By the cross—a mere cross, yes, yes—what of that!" she broke in, impatiently. "You based your fears on the sign of the cross which terminates the love line on this hand. But that is nothing—it can mean nothing—I have no patience with these superstitions; and were I not of your blood, and knew this youth's arrival had been truly predicted, I should feel disposed to laugh at your prophecies after the manner of strangers at the fortune-tellers of our race. Oh, Lovell, it must be removed—this prohibition—you must explain its presence away. You were mistaken!"

"Listen. He is an Englishman?"

"He is."

"A youth, fair-haired and comely?"

"Alas, yes!"

"He is beloved by, and loves another, who is also fair and beautiful—an English maiden. Have I been mistaken, Lady Diarrogh?"

"Proceed!"

"He is not entirely indifferent to your presence?"

"Oh, that it might be true!" she cried, with kindling eyes.

"In your heart, daughter, you know I have but spoken the truth. Yet be warned of me, the acquaintanceship must end. Its continuance may prove fatal to yourself, to him, and to this young girl, to whom he is even now betrothed. Ah, you start! Am I then mistaken? No, no, I have not read in vain!"

"Lovell, it may not end thus. It shall not! I have decided to proceed—ah, yes, to the bitter end, and regardless of any consequences your divination may have in store for me! Can you not have some better comfort for me than this? You have loved—mayhap sometime in vain—and must know the tortures your words are bringing to my heart! Oh, give me, then, some better assurance of success than the contrariety suggested by this sinister mark; speak to me, Lovell!"

"Daughter, listen to me. It may not be. My heart beats with the deepest sympathy for you in your position; but this power of revelation has also my profoundest respect, and I can but display its import to you in all its truthfulness, and give you the warning word."

"Then you will not oppose me?"

"Nay, Heaven forbid! You may, and I hope will, command my services as heretofore, and believe me you shall find me ready in every way to help you."

"So let the worst befall! We shall see! For I care not." She turned from him with a reckless laugh, and gathered her cloak about her shoulders as if to leave him.

"Beware, daughter!"

"I care not, I tell you. Let them see to it. Good-night, my friend. Our next meeting will, I trust, be under more assured and happier auspices."

He moved as if to detain her, but she was already some distance away, and he remained watching her receding figure with the old look of commiseration in his eyes, until it passed from his sight. Then, turning with bowed head and muttered words, he rejoined the expectant Breconridge at the lodge and was shown out of the castle grounds.

CHAPTER XI.

"OH, EVELYN, DO YOU THINK WE'RE IN A TRAP?"

Hand-in-hand together, as time out of number, and on happier occasions, they had wandered a-maying through their native meads, the conscience-stricken youth and the equally wretched young girl passed from the hall hurriedly and without word of speech. Instinctively they seemed to feel the necessity for withdrawing as far as possible from their late companions, and with this object they proceeded to the end of the passage leading from the hall to the studio, and finding the door of the latter apartment open, and the room itself unlit save by the beams of the moon that entered the deep oriel on the outer side of the castle, leaving the inner portion of the vast room in comparative darkness, they entered, and, closing the door behind them, withdrew into the recess of the furthermost of these windows.

From the moment young Darley felt the trembling little hand in his own, and noted the droop of the small head, with the very curls falling downward as if out of sympathy for her in her distress and concealing her wan cheeks, he had realized the enormity of the wrong he had conferred on this gentle heart, and contrition deep and sincere came into his own, to the utter extinction of any illicit fires that might hitherto have smouldered therein.

He would have retained her hand for some space longer, but she withdrew it gently from him, and moving a little away from the window, stood with downcast eyes, in the full light of the moon, the very presentment, as it seemed to him, of some beautiful and accusing spirit of the castle.

Gradually she lifted her face to his, and, as their eyes met, the colour flew to her cheeks, and she broke silence with surprising acerbity of voice for one of so equable a temperament.

"Well, my lord?"

"Don't, Marion!"

"You deserve it, sir! I will never call you Evelyn again—so there!"

"Heavens, don't say that, Marion! What have I done? At least, I meant to say, what have you done?"

"Who, I, my lord? Oh——"

"No, no, I didn't mean that—please don't go away—I meant, what haven't we both done?"

"Speak for yourself, sir!"

"I can't, my heart's too full, dear. Oh, Marion, you once told me you would never call me 'my lord' or 'sir' again."

"Don't make me cry, Evelyn!"

"Heaven forbid, my darling! Give me your hand again. I will promise you not to squeeze it—if you will forgive me."

"Nor attempt to kiss me, sir?"

"Never, I swear—till you forgive me."

"Then you admit that you have done very wrong," she said, having given him her hand with the abovementioned reservations. "Evelyn, I could never have believed it of you—never—never—never! Oh, I am so ashamed of you!"

"Well, I must admit I have been perhaps a little foolish," he stammered, hanging his head shamefacedly under her accusatory looks. "Believe me, I am most sincerely sorry if I have hurt your feelings, Marion—will you—can you—forgive me?"

"And you are really, and truly, very sorry, Evelyn?" she enquired, tentatively, a little touched and gratified by his obvious sincerity.

"You have never known me to tell you a falsehood, dear," he replied, with manly directness, "and why should I do so now? I will be candid with you (for you must know that I speak with all sincerity) and assure you that I would not have gone to such lengths had I not felt piqued at your tolerating the impertinences of her ladyship's brother. Could you not see that the man was making desperate love to you?"

"O—oh!"

"Yes, 'oh,' indeed. Don't you think a portion of the scolding should come from me?"

"But I wasn't a bit jealous!"

"No more was I—not a bit!"

"Evelyn, don't be so cruel. You are trying to quarrel with me!"

"Why, bless the child, what have I said now?"

"You said you weren't jealous!"

"Because you said *you* weren't, why should I be in that case?"

"But I felt hurt, dear."

"Oh, well, that alters the case entirely. I admit that I felt hurt too. Shall we make friends now?"

"And you will not make love to Lady Diarrogh——"

"Who, I?"

"Yes, you sir!"

"And Don Domingo?"

"There, my lord——"

"Don't call me that."

"Would you not be a lord—if two cousins distant and remote did die. Pish, I'll call you what I please, my lord."

"Marion, don't be so foolish! Of course I will promise; but I think it ought to be mutual."

"Evelyn, I don't think you should impose such a condition on me. I have never, in all my life, been aught but true to you, dear, in every thought."

"There—there, don't weep, my little one! What a stupendous brute I must have been to be sure! Come, lassie mine, your Evelyn promises you—swears to you by yon lovers' light—to be the truest and best of boys to his heart's own queen!"

With this extravagant flourish he took the reluctant little hands away from her streaming eyes, and pushing back the masses of hair from her brow, kissed her often and tenderly.

"You—you remember—what—you — said — when we stood in the fairy-ring that night in the light of the moon?" she sobbed, as she twisted and untwisted his watch-chain as was her wont in moments of storm and from a remote period of their acquaintanceship.

"Yes, yes, I know, dear," he replied a little confusedly, and shirking the tear-dimmed eyes. "What a memory you have got to be sure! I think I swore ——"

"You swore by the moon, then, to do all you have just promised me now—but you didn't!"

"Quite true, my dear, and I ought to be placed with my back to the nearest wall and shot for it!"

"No you oughtn't—how dare you say such a thing, Evelyn!"

"Well, perhaps not, dear. But I will never pledge myself by the moon again, or anything half so unstable, while I can hold this little hand in mine and swear by the brave little—true little—heart that animates it. Are we friends now?"

"Perhaps."

"Marion!"

She had by some great effort of will repressed her manifestations of grief, and with both his hands held in hers, and at arm's length, was gazing into his eyes with a staidness of look so foreign to her in her dealings with him, that his lover's heart sank within him as before some impending stroke.

"Yes, I am going to speak very seriously to you, Evelyn," she went on quietly and very deliberately. "Yet I would not wish to say anything that might cause you pain. Hush, you must not interrupt me! I have been thinking about it over and over, so hard, all last night, that my head ached. I thought if, perhaps, we—if you, dear, had decided too hastily, without thought of the future, and the possibility of your meeting some other whom you could like better than myself, it would not yet be too late to—to turn back. I am not saying it lightly, Evelyn. God forbid I should do so wicked a thing! But I mean it. I mean it for your happiness. As for me, I am the same—ever, ever the same to you, as it was from the beginning. But, oh, I would be the wretchedest of women in this world did I know that in after years you would realize that your love had been wrongly bestowed, and that the ties of marriage were but bonds to hold you apart from another! Evelyn, we are yet so young—I heard them call us 'children' last night—and I have a presentiment that we—that you, may after all have seen things closely—after the manner of children, and that you will tire in time of the toy that has ceased to attract your older eyes. Let me not stand in your way—to be the miserable cause of your future reproaches. I will return to my father to-morrow, leaving you here, and explain to him that it was my wish. I will give him no reason to feel embittered towards you, rest assured of that; for on my head alone shall lie all the blame for this step. And I will be so brave, so quiet, for your sake, Evelyn. Consider, dear, and tell me would it not be better for you—for—for—us both?"

The earnestness with which the words were uttered, and the tender seriousness of look that had endowed her child-features with something proximating to the matronly, had communicated a corresponding sense of sobriety to the light-hearted youth—generally so prone to meet her young enthusiasms with an air of easy patronage.

"And would you have me do this on the supposition that it would conduce to my happiness alone, Mabs?" he said, as he drew her half-resisting form nearer and nearer to him until the great soft eyes and every feature of the young sweet face were clearly revealed in the weird cold light that shone in upon them.

"Evelyn, I would—try me!"

"And you would uncomplainingly abide by my decision to remain here, and blot me for ever out of your memory?"

"Never out of my memory, Evelyn, because you would always be in my thoughts—prompted as they would be by my heart. I could not do that—I did not say that. But I would undergo the ordeal of banishment from you, my love, to consult your happiness—ay, even though in the end that poor heart should of its great sorrow for ever cease to throb! I can say no more!"

She had turned her face from him to the window, and, trembling from head to foot, her hand still clasped in his, was gazing out over the whited elms into the starry deeps beyond.

"Marion!"

He was on his knee close to her side, and looking up at her with the expression one may have witnessed when, in critical moments such as this, the adolescent face is changed by a newer and stronger passion into that of matured experience.

She turned to him again on hearing her name breathed in tones wherein supplication, deep contrition, and tender reproach were so strangely commingled, and laying her disengaged hand on his head, she pushed it gently backward until the face lay fully revealed to her in the mellow light of the moon. Long did she gaze into his eyes and essay to read their true drift, the while the little white fingers played amidst his curls—and throughout the ordeal he watched her as one who might await in breathless suspense the pronouncement of a recording angel—and then with a bright smile of unconditional pardon, she pressed the truant head to her side, and patted it gently and reassuringly.

"There, you may rise—you naughty boy; for I have forgiven you, and we are friends once more."

"For ever now, Mabs?"

"For ever and ever, dear—may God will that it be so!"

"And we will go home—won't we, Mabs?"

"At once, Evelyn—to-night, if we might. To-morrow for a certainty. I have so much to tell you since I last had an opportunity of speaking to you. Do you know I have seen the chaplain of the castle—dear old Father Benito—and he has counselled me, under seal of secrecy, to leave this place without delay!"

"But, gracious Heavens! what have we done?" he exclaimed, aghast at the suddenness of the proposition.

"It is not that, dear—it is not altogether anything that we may have said or done. Can you not see? Oh, Evelyn, are you so very very blind as all that?"

"Not that I am aware of, Mabs!" exclaimed the astonished youth, interpreting her literally, and rubbing his eyes vigorously. "There you stand before me in the gentle moonlight, like the pretty little sprite you ever were—in every particular respect. What is it, then?"

"Now, Evelyn, I must really give you credit for being a bigger stupid than you have always affected to be. Surely you must see—must know—that Lady Diarrogh likes you, my poor boy; and that—that perhaps she may like you very much!"

This was bringing matters home again to the young recreant with a vengeance, and he stood before her with bent head to conceal the crimson that had leaped into his cheeks and suffused his face.

She seemed to pity his very obvious distress, and resumed, "Then there is her ladyship's brother, Don Domingo——"

"Well, what of him?" he suddenly broke in with a fierceness that shocked her not a little. "Has he dared——"

"Don't, Evelyn dear! You must keep your temper, remember, or you will ruin all!"

"But, confound the fellow; look here, Marion, you don't mean to say——"

"He has conducted himself towards me in every respect as a gentleman should, Evelyn, and I would not have you quarrel with him on my account for worlds—unless," and she held up a little forefinger at him in the most truculent manner, "you would wish me to call you 'my l——'"

"Heaven forbid! I will be mute on the point, if it be your wish. But I understand the inference, nevertheless, and can see that his room would be infinitely more preferable to you than his company. Is it not so?"

"You won't quarrel with him, will you, Evelyn?" she entreated. "Perhaps, after all, it was my fault. But we must go—we must go to-morrow," she added, with a sudden access of alarm. "Otherwise I feel that something terrible may happen. Is it not strange that we should not have heard from home? You know we asked for replies by return of post, and we have been here now for two whole days! Oh, Evelyn, do you think——"

"I am beginning to think that we have got into a trap," he muttered to himself, as he turned away and started to pace the floor before her, in unconscious imitation of certain animals in a similar predicament. At this moment a mist seemed to roll away from his mental vision, and he began to piece together several incidents tending to confirm his suspicions as to an enforced stay, although its ulterior motive was as yet a puzzle which no effort of imagination would enable him to solve. He recalled to mind the wanton destruction of the machines, and that on two subsequent occasions, when he had desired to stroll over to the village, he had been unable to do so owing to the unaccountable absence of the warder, Breconridge. Then there remained the uncomfortable fact that the castle was being used for the purpose of a conspiracy, which might in some way involve them—which might, for aught he knew to the contrary, have some bearing on this very restriction of liberty. It was an uncomfortable awakening after so long a period of unalloyed happiness, and but for a natural sentiment of revolt against so intolerable a condition of affairs, and a sense of his own responsibility towards this helpless young girl—apart from the spirit of derring-do to which he had responded with all the fervour of an ardent, boyish, and romantic temperament—he would of a certainty have been prone to give way to his feelings in angry terms of self-reproach.

He had realized the necessity for concealing his apprehensions from his cousin, and, above all, to make no mention of the cycle incident, or of the political transactions that were being carried out within the castle. To quiet her alarms was the first object to be attained—the second, to see Lady Diarrogh immediately with a view of bringing their visit to a termination.

"Come, Marion," said he, with a well-assumed lightness of manner, as he took her hand and drew her towards the door. "Matters may not be so bad as we have imagined them to be. Recollect that after all we are in old England now, and that if our homes are castles the same law would prevent their becoming prisons. Come, let us return to the drawing-room, where I will seek an opportunity of speaking to Lady Diarrogh on the subject of our departure to-morrow."

A slight exclamation of alarm from the young girl, as she instinctively drew closer to him, caused him to look up suddenly, and there, but a few paces from them, her tall figure in shadowy outline, with the dazzling white bust and arms in soft relief, stood the subject of their alarms—Rufina del Montefuego—gazing upon them with the old malign expression, which had so fascinated the youth in her portrait.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BLIND FURY OF A GREAT PASSION.

"Ah! you were returning to us then, truants," said Lady Diarrogh, who was the first of the group to break the painful silence that supervened, her face now completely divested of its hard look by the most ravishing of smiles, as she sank with exquisite grace of *abandon* upon a seat within the windowed recess. "Nay, do not go away, I pray of you, for I expect that my brother will join us shortly for a stroll through the grounds, and this half light is so charmingly romantic, is it not? So, here he comes! *Adelante*—come in, my worthy brother, for I have found them at last—these runaways. Come, I will ring for wraps, and we will go out on the terrace!"

"But, sister!" protested the Spaniard, as his tall form emerged into the light and foregathered with them. "I have been sent by especial request to ask Miss Wilton to come and sing for us!"

"Now, Señor, my brother, you must not thus disappoint me!" pouted the beauty, shrugging her shapely shoulders pettishly. "I have set my heart upon taking the air. The rooms are so warm. Surely, Mr. Darley, you will intercede for me, and permit your cousin to return to the drawing-room with my brother?"

"But Lady Diarrogh—Evelyn, I could not sing!" exclaimed the distressed little damosel, appealingly. "Don Domingo, you must hold me excused. I really could not! Evelyn, speak to them for me!" she implored in an undertone. "I should only break down—and—and cry instead; I know I should!"

"There, my dear," said the latter, laughingly, as he pressed her hand to reassure her. "You will not be asked to sing; for Don Domingo, I am sure, would not be so ungallant as to refuse Miss Wilton's request so strenuously urged."

"*Caramba,* no, Señorita," exclaimed the Spaniard, with much fervour, as he bent his tall figure in stately salute. "But the Señorita Wilton will accompany me, nevertheless, to the drawing-room to witness the Bolero Nacional, which it is the intention of my good friend, Don Fabricio, and Señorita Mercedes to dance for our delectation. Will she not, Don Evelyn?"

"By all means," acquiesced the youth on her behalf, and then hurriedly whispered to her as she still held his hand as though reluctant to leave him, "Go with him, Mabs—it is my opportunity—leave all to me."

The light was full upon his face as he spoke, and reassured by the look of set determination she saw thereon she gave her arm to del Montefuego, and left the room with him.

"Now, Lady Diarrogh, I am entirely at your service."

She had been sitting with her face to the window with affected indifference to their conversation; but now as her quick ear detected the change in his voice and manner, she turned abruptly towards him with some appearance of uneasiness.

In an instant she seemed to have divined the reason of this change, and to have resolved upon some line of action accordingly.

"What say you if we remain here, Evelyn?" she enquired, with all the artlessness of a spoilt child in the soft tone of her voice, and the entreaty of the dark languorous eyes. "It is so much more cosy, and we shall have less risk of being disturbed. How say you, then, will you sit by me here?"

"With all happiness, Lady Diarrogh——"

"Whom are you addressing yourself to, Evelyn?" she flashed at him with a naïve smile. "I know not such a person here."

"To you, Lady——"

"Ye—es?"

The occult powers of those unfathomable eyes appeared to have done their work only too well.

"Rufina."

"Come, come, that is so very much better. You rude boy, I had really begun to imagine that I had in some way offended you. Tell me now, truly, was it not your intention before I arrived to acquaint me of your determination to leave me—yes?"

Her candour was, to say the least, embarrassing. Thrown off his guard by the boldness of the attack he was left without a word to say in his defence.

"It was, Lady—I mean, Rufina."

"And why?" she persisted, with the smile still on her lips, as she bent slightly to catch his eyes and enchain his attention—her strongest point of assault.

"Miss Wilton is alarmed at not hearing from her father, and would hasten home at once to learn the cause."

Coward, coward! 'The woman gave me of the tree and I did eat.' Will it be ever thus?

She made haste to follow up her success and fortify the position already gained.

"And why may she not go? There is nothing to prevent that—no."

"No; nothing. She would leave to-morrow morning."

"Assuredly! And you, Evelyn?"

He looked at her shyly with the old sense of awe; for, despite his utmost endeavours to resist the alluring charms of her magnetic personality, he felt that in this game of love she was more than his master, and that away from his cousin's side he was absolutely at her feet. Poor moth! was there then no friendly power near by to place thee without the beams of this all-devouring light?

Yes, hark! It is her voice—Marion's; coming from afar off, and faintly upon his ears. Could it be fancy, or was it to be believed that she had overcome her diffidence in her concern for him, and that the sweet theme—his favorite one—was being poured forth from the depths of that pure heart in the vague hope that it might reach his ears, and fortify him in his hour of peril. To him the simple melody, bringing in with it the very atmosphere of the summer meads and mavis-haunted groves of her Somersetshire home, had never appealed as it did then with so tender a charm. The distance was too far for him to catch the words, but they were familiar enough to him from a very early period, and he had no difficulty in wedding them to the music.

I dreamed o'ernight of my westward home
And childhood time ere I 'gan roam.
With meadow-moth and painted bee
I wantoned on the nectared lea:
Tall yellow-cup and daisie dear
Were there, anew, to greet the year:
Again, I plucked the cowslip pale,
And wandered in the primrose vale:
With daffodil that, dancing, grew,
With violet buds, and bells so blue,
I posies made.

The mavis, midst the hawthorn bloom,
Beguiled my ghost from its far tomb:
Now cuckoo called, and Philomel,
His plaint did make on hill, in dell.
Anon I saw my dear love's home—
From open door a form did come—
O dear, my love, no more thy call
My wakened sense may now enthral!
Came sudden day—a strange tongue spoke—
My heaven dissolved, and I—awoke!
How far away!

When the last note of the refrain had faded and ceased, leaving naught behind it but the sound of his own beating heart—beating now in wild response to the appeal of some better spirit that had crept into it, God knows of her sending—he had by a supreme and lasting effort of will shaken himself entirely free from the bondage of the fair tyrant beside him, let her plead her cause never so boldly.

His companion, who had remained silent during the progress of the song, to all appearance touched in spite of herself by its native simplicity of charm, but still with her eyes riveted upon him as though she were endeavouring to hold him to her by the spell which the sound of his cousin's voice might at any moment snap, now ventured again to address him, and, as she did so, he was surprised to perceive that her eyes were moistened with tears.

"Evelyn," she began—and there was the trace of almost a sob in the low, soft voice that breathed so close to him now—"you have not replied to me: to my question. I did presume to enquire if Miss Wilton's departure would alter your resolve to remain here—with me, Evelyn? Nay, nay," she added in sudden alarm, and with a slight shiver as she noticed his changed aspect, and was fearful of his reply, "say it not—do not speak—until I have spoken; for you know not, you can not know, how momentous the consequences of that reply would be to me—to us both."

The hot red blood was in her cheeks now as she pushed the clustering black locks off her brow with the vague movement of a fevered patient. Yet, ever holding him with her eyes while she hastily revolved in her mind how she might best state her case to him without incurring the repulse she so feared, she gradually reverted to her usual condition of self-control, nay, almost of command, as she took both his hands in hers and looked him squarely in the face.

"Listen to me, Evelyn, until I unfold to you what has been upon my mind, and has left me, neither by day nor by night, awake or in my dreams, to one hour of perfect happiness!"

"Indeed, Lady Diarrogh, I am very, very sorry," he stammered, divining her meaning at length, pitying her distress, yet adamant withal in the cause of his fair cousin.

"So you will call me by that name! *Bueno*, let it be so, then. Possibly I am to blame, possibly it is the Fates—possibly you."

"How, I?"

"I will speak to you very frankly, Evelyn; as one who is older than you by several years; as an elder sister to a brother dearly beloved; and as it is the custom of a country where a frank avowal of a passion that devours is the privilege of our sex, and may not be outside a maiden's province. Listen, then, *mi rubiosito*, my fair-haired one," she went on, as she passed her hand caressingly through his curls, and smiled tenderly upon him. "Listen, and I will tell you this tale (the burden of which is more than I can bear) in the hope that I may gain your sympathies, *querido mio*, over to my side."

In his embarrassment, which was not unqualified perhaps by a sense of self-shame at a result to which he had in a measure wilfully contributed, he would fain have risen, and thus ended a scene that had now become as painful to him as, alas! from an opposite point of view, it was equally disturbing to the proud suppliant beside him. But she was not to be gainsaid, as, still holding his hands in hers, her eyes endeavouring to read the passing effect of her words, and speaking in hurried sentences that were fast getting beyond her control in the storm of passion that goaded them, she went on—

"Come thou nearer to me, Evelyn—you are not afraid? I am but a woman! Nay—your hand again; for have we not been of the firmest friends hitherto? It is this then, *mi rubio*—an old-world tale, 'tis true; but one, nevertheless, that repeats itself in these days of invidious love and false chivalry until the moral becomes irresistible—alas! to the few. Tell me, then, would it not surprise you to hear that our meeting at Tarnworth was not unforeseen by me—that, of a verity, it was already foretold to me while yet my lord was alive?"

Her conviction of manner was so manifest to him that he could only sit and stare at her in blank amazement at so unexpected an announcement.

"You are indeed amazed—possibly you are incredulous—as I in my simplicity was unbelieving at the time I was apprised of it. Yet has it thus far been truly fulfilled—this prophecy, as I devoutly hope it may in all other respects. Evelyn, it was further revealed to me that we should become very dear friends," she continued, and improvising for the occasion on the original divination as laid down by the gipsy Lovell. "Tell me, has not this happy consummation been also achieved?"

"Your informant must have been possessed of rare powers of prophecy," he replied to her with frank directness as his interest in her words deepened, "for are we not already—at least I trust so, and speaking for myself—the best of friends. You received us into your castle as complete strangers, and have treated us ever since with extreme kindness. For this I am more than grateful."

She greeted the avowal with a tremulous sigh of the deepest disappointment, and sat silently watching him as his eyes wandered away to the door in the vain hope that the entry of some person might serve to break off a conversation that was, to him, verging dangerously on the intolerable.

When, after an interval of some seconds, he turned to her again, it was with an exclamation of surprise; and then consternation and shame suddenly set his cheeks aglow and his heart throbbing fiercely within him. For she had sunk quietly down on her knees beside him—this arrogant, self-willed, and imperious beauty, whose very loveliness was chastened and heightened thereby—and with his hands tightly clasped in hers, was looking up wildly, entreatingly into his face.

" Evelyn, it is the privilege—the privilege of love, to declare itself when the heart may break of its unbearable secret. You have spoken to me in the words of love—you have led me to believe that it was in your heart—that the heart of woman was no light thing to be trifled with and cast for ever aside. You, who have done this thing of grace, knowing as you must have done—for I yet spoke not the word, fearing you would deem me immodest—you, I repeat, must have known that your words, sentiments, sympathies, your very presence, had become part of my being, and that without their continuance I should even cease to exist. You, I say, who have done this knowingly, must listen to me now with the same openness of heart—with kindness—with mercy—ay, even to me—at your feet—in abject supplication, when I declare to you in words emphatic, truly sincere, and from the depths of a tortured soul—oh, *Madre de Dios!* intercede for me!—that I love you! No, no, no, you must not—you shall not rise until you have heard me, nor shall you repulse me from you; or, before the great God who has all our acts and intents in His vigils, I do solemnly declare that I will hurl myself bodily from this window into the moat beneath, and the deed shall be laid to your charge. Evelyn, whom I love—be kind to me—listen to me—nay, you shall not go. How say you—your cousin? And do you then really think that the baby love of this feather-brained girl is for one moment to be weighed against the life's devotion of Rufina del Montefuego—who of her great regard would endow you with all she possesses on earth, and be content—be happy—to remain for ever at your feet your willing, loving slave? Yes, I will restrain myself—I will be calmer. You have right—I would that the tears would come!—you pity me—you say you like me! But that is naught to me. I would have your love, my charming

—I would have you tell this cousin that she is at liberty to depart at her option, but that you will remain with me here and be my love. She is young—a child, and capricious, and if I may know the thoughts of woman, will receive the notification with equanimity. How—you can not—you may not do this? Then must you be informed of the truth—that she loves—that she is beloved by—my brother; and that you, my poor boy, have been basely betrayed!"

In the blind fury of her great passion she had overstepped her usual caution, and entering upon ground that was hallowed in his eyes now, had jeopardised her cause beyond retrieval.

He had risen to his feet—dismayed, perplexed, yet thoroughly aroused to the seriousness of his position, and, if truth were told, not a little incensed with her for this insinuation, this calumny, on the fair name of one whose integrity he was prepared to uphold against any and every comer who might dare to challenge it.

What he said to her in reply to her passionate harangue it would scarcely be within our province to relate at length. A response, off-hand, and in the negative, to so eloquent an appeal, would, of a necessity, be as painful in the reading as the effort at voicing it was assuredly—let us say embarrassing to this mere boy, fresh to a position seldom vouchsafed even to the most successful of his elders. Yet, as he proceeded with his self-imposed task, and warmed to it under a stern sense of its inevitableness, the words came forth with unwonted, if to her pitiless, directness, as she stood before him in the almost noonday light—amazed at his temerity, his audacity in thus repelling her, and with but a vestige of the soft love-light now appearing in her wrath-enkindled eyes. But in the wildest transports of a baffled regard the iron will of this remarkable woman came to her aid, and, for the moment at least, saved the occasion. She knew, for the first time, and probably liked him the better for it, that if an element of "dare" were brought into the contest, here, at last, she had met with one who would have no fear for any consequences; and as he had deigned to overlook her aspersions on his cousin, and had ended his remarks with a profession of friendship and a solemn assurance that the incident would never, on his side, be divulged, she had seen, with returning reason, that it would be dangerous in the extreme to urge him further, lest by a false step in her then half-reckless state she might convert his suspicions into alarm, and thereby precipitate a disaster she yet sought to avert.

"Come," she said, with a set expression of face that would have wakened his direst apprehensions had it not been turned from the light, "we will talk no more of this, Señor Darley. It is of the past. If you must depart from us to-morrow, you will at least confer on me the honour of remaining at my side for the rest of the evening. Come, let us rejoin the others."

And with her arm in his, proudly erect, and with a look of indomitable resolve in her flashing eyes, she quitted the room with him.

CHAPTER XIII.

"THE HONOUR OF BECOMING THIS TRAITOR'S EXECUTIONER."

There are times, it may have been noted, when the very elements, as if in malign sympathy with our disasters, have seemed to pause in their mutable riot to lend their attentions and aids to the general havoc; and it was on such a morning as this (following upon the events last narrated) that the light broke in tardily, and of an ashen, wintry gray, upon the feast-tired eyes of waking Tarnworth. A dark pall of thunderclouds had foregathered during the night with many a baleful gleam and reverberant muttering, and now hung above the castle tops in the revealed majesty of their far-reaching battalions, massed and threatening, and in every conceivable stage of involution.

Within the castle itself there were not a few signs to indicate that events of an unusual character were about to transpire. Don Domingo del Montefuego had been closeted with his sister in her boudoir from an early hour in the morning; and on leaving her, which he did with some haste, and an assumption of austerity that boded ill for the object of his reflections, he immediately sent for the eldest of the conspirators, the venerable Don Saturnino, and besought him to meet him with the others, without a moment's delay, in the West Tower—their usual trysting place.

In a small vaulted chamber, originally a prison cell, in this tower, the adherents of the exiled prince were now sitting in solemn conclave. At the head of the table, with Don Urbano and Don Fabricio on his right and left, sat del Montefuego, and facing him Don Saturnino, in his position of vice-president, with Diego Suarez and Don Francisco on either side of him. The artist, who had been engaged in animated conversation with the remaining two conspirators, Don Adriano and Santiago, seemed, nevertheless, far from being at his ease; and as he glanced from president to vice-president from time to time, as they leisurely produced and proceeded to assort some papers relative to the business on hand, the pallor on his emaciated cheeks increased, and his eyes had the affrighted look of one who has the presentiment of death itself within their vision.

This nervous tension, which was already beginning to communicate itself to the others, was at length relieved by the president, del Montefuego, who, arising from his seat and in tones of solemn and portentous gravity, heightened by the florid and grandiloquent periods of a courtly idiom, addressed them as follows:—

"Señores and *caballeros,* my very estimable comrades, and faithful servitors of the King! You have been summoned here at this early hour, I trust not with indecorous haste, at the request of my much-esteemed sister, the Doña Rufina, in order that you may be made acquainted with the expressed desire of el Señor Diego Suarez, as conveyed to her last evening, to return to his house and avocations in our city of Burgos. Señores, it is the intention of el Señor Suarez, as explained to me in person, to continue in the interests of a cause which he professes——"

"With every sentiment of the profoundest respect, Señor el Presidente," exclaimed the latter, starting to his feet in obvious alarm, "but you have misinterpreted me. I said not 'professed.' I did solemnly avow that the cause would remain of my heart, as it has hitherto ever been manifested to you!"

"Which he professes to have so much at heart," continued Don Domingo in icy tones, and motioning the unfortunate artist to his seat. "He has, moreover, *caballeros*—this Señor Suarez—tendered his good offices to utilize his departure by conveying our latest informations to His Majesty, with whom, as you are aware, he has already had audience; and, further, that he will be prepared to keep us informed, from time to time, as to the development of affairs in ministerial circles. Have I right, Señor, in thus conveying your sentiments to these *caballeros,* your confidants and friends?"

"*Ciertamente,* Señor el presidente. It is a pleasure unspeakable to me to be thus truthfully construed!"

"It remains then, Señores, having heard this our comrade's protestations of unswerving loyalty to His Majesty, to lend our sanction to his immediate departure, and to wish him God-speed in his ventures. And yet, Señores," he added, with a stern melancholy that positively set the traitor's teeth a-chattering with fear, "though I protest before Heaven that the task is one of supreme pain to me as a compatriot of el Señor Suarez, I am nevertheless constrained to unfold to you certain particulars which have lately come to the knowledge of my lady and myself, which should compel your severest scrutiny before that permission may be extended to him! Señor Suarez, I demand of you to inform these *caballeros,* your intimate friends and comrades in arms, if the caligraphy upon this letter addressed to the council in Madrid is yours?"

He handed the paper to Don Fabricio, who, with a muttered oath, and an expression of extreme anger on his pale, ascetic features, held it across the table before the starting eyes of the terror-stricken painter.

"No—no—no!" cried the latter wildly, as he endeavoured to regain his tottering legs, and would have snatched the document from Don Fabricio's grasp, had the latter not anticipated him. "I know not the writing! It is a forgery! *Por Dios!* Señores, listen to me before you condemn me! I declare to you that I am innocent of this infamy!"

"Señores," continued Don Domingo, with the inexorableness of fate, as the letter went around the table, and having been perused with angry exclaim, was returned to him again by del Monte, "I will ask you if, in your opinion, and of your knowledge of this man's handwriting, you are sufficiently convinced that this betrayal is the work of el Señor Suarez—and he alone?"

"There remains not the least scintilla of doubt in our minds as to its genuineness, Señor el Presidente," replied the aged Don Saturnino on behalf of the others. "Possibly he will not now deny it?"

"I repeat that it is the basest of forgeries!" protested the culprit with a new courage of desperation, as he stood with folded arms and pallid lips confronting his implacable accuser. "I demand to know from whence this paper has been derived? I tell you to your face, Señor el Presidente, that this feigned message is the work of an enemy, and that I would be confronted with its bearer, in order that I may question him as to its genuineness. *Caballeros,* I appeal to you for a fairer hearing!"

"With all my heart," observed del Montefuego, with a contemptuous glance at the miserable delinquent, as he resumed his seat and clapped his hands thrice together.

At the summons the door opened, and Breconridge, the major-domo, entered.

"You will be so good as to signify to these gentlemen, Breconridge, whether you were in attendance at the lodge yesterday at the hour of noon. Am I right in my conjecture that you were there?"

The mute nodded his head at the assembled company in vigorous assent.

"Immediately on the departure of the postman from the gates you were visited by a gentleman of this assembly—were you not?"

Again did the stalwart major-domo signal the correctness of the surmise to his imperturbable questioner—and the artist quietly resumed his seat.

"Have, then, the extreme goodness to indicate this gentleman to myself and friends."

With his eyes already fixed upon the cowering Don Diego, the major-domo pointed him out without the least hesitation of manner; and then, as if to dispel any doubts there might be in the minds of the company as to whom he would refer, he advanced to the table, and laid his powerful hand on Señor Suarez's shoulder.

"Good! It is most evident to us! You may now retire—stay! You will send in this messenger to us, for I would question him also."

When, again, they glanced towards the door the major-domo had disappeared, and in his place the tall figure of the gipsy Lovell stood before them in respectful salutation. On seeing him the accused, with an exclamation of dismay, sank back into his chair in a condition of utter collapse.

"You live in the proximity of the castle walls, Lovell, and are known to myself and my sister and most of these gentlemen here for your integrity in our affairs, and more especially for your tact in forwarding and receiving those documents which it may not be considered advisable to transmit through the village office. Be pleased, then, to receive the assurance of our continued confidence in this integrity, and—arising out of these matters political—deign to inform these gentlemen how you became possessed of a particular despatch handed by you to my lady last evening."

"The letter, attached to a stone, was thrown over the boundary walls—almost into my hands—at midday yesterday, and shortly before the departure of the postman from the castle gates," replied the gipsy, with a calm deliberateness of manner that froze the very life-blood in the renegade's veins, as he bent forward to catch his reply. "I considered it my duty to return it from whence it came, and did so—placing it in her ladyship's hands."

A murmur of sympathetic approval went up from the assembled conspirators as the president proceeded to convey their thanks to him for this timely forethought—a demonstration of gratitude that was further emphasised by the entire company, with the exception of Don Diego, rising to their feet and bending to the gipsy in gracious salute as he turned and left the room.

"You will retire immediately to the ante-chamber, Señor," observed Don Domingo sternly to the wretched Suarez, who had given way to profound despair, and sat with his head buried in his hands over the table. "You will there find the major-domo Breconridge in attendance, and you will return forthwith to the council chamber upon hearing my summons. Come, Señor—despatch! We would be relieved of your presence."

The prisoner, for he knew he had now forfeited his liberty of person, if not his life, raised his head slowly from the table, and, looking appealingly at the pitiless faces about him, tottered to his feet, and moved dejectedly from the room.

When the door had closed upon him the president again rose, and proceeded in quiet tones, rendered all the more impressive by the calculative coldness pervading them—

"The punishment, Señores, for so heinous a crime as that of which this *individuo* has been found guilty, for I would but take up your time needlessly to further discuss so idle a theme, is one of death, pure and simple!"

"*Santa Maria!*" cried the fiery young Don Urbano, drawing a revolver from under his mantle and laying it on the table before him, " but he richly merits at first the ordeal of torture, to wrest some further information from his perfidious lips! Señor el Presidente, vouchsafe to me the honour of becoming this traitor's executioner? "

" Your zeal, Señor Urbano," replied the president, with a grave smile, " deserves a better recognition at my hands than it will be possible for me to extend to you, heartily as I am with you in your professed sentiments of abhorrence! For, alas! Señores," he added generally, as he noted the surprise with which the announcement had been received, " we must not remain oblivious to the fact that the judiciary of this country is not disposed to sanction methods of intimidation and repression which in our Spain, and especially among our comrades, would meet with tolerance, if not approbation. No, Señores, we must, however reluctantly, dismiss this death penalty for the present from our minds until we have communicated the intelligence to our friends, in order that their dispositions may be altered, and that this traitor may be committed to their care on his arrival at Burgos. For the present, then, and with your approval, the sentence is that the prisoner, this Señor Suarez, be confined to the apartments allotted to him within the castle during my lady's pleasure, and that any attempt on his part to proceed beyond the limits of the courtyard will be at the immediate peril of his life. *Bueno!* your hands, then, Señores, are upheld in favour of this last course. Let the prisoner be brought in!"

When the latter, attended by Breconridge, again stood before them, the president, upstanding, and in measured terms of bitter contempt and reproach, proceeded to convey to him the unqualified opinion of his late comrades, and finally to intimate to him in the tersest manner possible the decision of the council.

As he moved to leave the room the enraged Don Urbano, with an uncontrollable impulse, leaped from his place at the table and smote the prisoner upon the face with his clenched hand.

"Dog, you shall answer for this treason with the blood of your coward heart! For I declare to you by the cross that I will pursue you, ay, even to your Burgos kennel with that sole object."

"Hah! then you dare not here, Señor!" retorted the other with a sneer, as he wiped the trickling blood from his cheek. "*Bueno*, you shall know where to find me. Señores, *mi estimados amigos!* with renewed assurances of my most exalted regards, *adios!*"

With a mock bow to the council, and a look of unquenchable hatred in his sloe-black eyes, the painter, accompanied by Breconridge, departed, and the conspirators, breaking up into several groups, went out after them into the oppressive and storm-boding atmosphere of the inner court.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN ENGLISHMAN'S FIGHT FOR HIS SWEETHEART'S FREEDOM.

In the meantime events, no less dramatic, were in course of development within the castle itself. The young Darley, after passing a night of feverish unrest, had risen with the first indications of dawn, and having assumed the cycling costume in which he had arrived, had betaken himself along the deserted corridors to the door of his cousin's chamber, where, true to an arrangement hurriedly made between them before parting on the previous night, he found her in waiting—as resolute of demeanour as himself, and fully dressed for their intended journey that morning to Bristol.

"Come along, Mabs," he whispered, as he affectionately greeted her, "you have nothing to fear now, for I bade Lady Diarrogh farewell last night, and, to avoid unnecessary comment and delay, asked her to explain our sudden departure to her brother and the others on the plea of our not having heard from home. She was graciousness itself—for, after all, my dear, she is not at all a bad sort, and appeared pleased when I thanked her for self and you, Mabs, for the hospitality with which she had entertained us. And you did as I asked you to do, my brave little woman?"

"Yes, Evelyn dear. I said good-bye to her when I wished her good-night, and told her that it was your desire that we should leave here very early in the morning in order that we might reach home before nightfall. But I fancy—I don't know—oh, Evelyn, you will think me very foolish! but I thought there was a look in her eyes as she graciously listened to my excuses, and accepted them, that was not in keeping with her smiles and her professions of regret—a look that you will see in the eyes of people who are dissatisfied, cruel, and—and, in fact, who have already made up their minds to do you a hurt. Yes, dear, I will come at once—see, I am quite ready! That stairs to the left, with the carved lions on the balusters (for I marked it last night), will take us into the lower corridor leading to the postern door through which you came on our arrival. Softly, softly, Evelyn, I can hear footsteps below!"

Leaning over the heavy rails that guarded the descent, they espied, in the gloom beneath them, the muffled figures of the conspirators hurriedly passing along in the direction of the great hall, and their astonishment at seeing the Spaniards so betimely astir was only exceeded by the sudden fear that these mysterious movements had some connection with the intended departure of their guests.

"Keep close to me, Mabs—confound these creaking old boards! There goes that hoary old sinner Don Saturnino, with murder writ large on his parchment-dry features. Now is our time, for they are going in the opposite direction to the corridor. Gently does it—on tip-toe, Mabs. Now we are on *terra firma.* Give me your hand—why, how it is trembling! They won't hear us on this matting; so here goes for a run!"

Suiting the action to the word they pressed swiftly onwards through the intricacies of the narrow corridor, and, in the almost total darkness, colliding at times with projecting cabinets, jutting armoury, and awkward corners, until they arrived at the small postern door before referred to, breathless, and in a condition of wild excitement.

Eagerly his fumbling fingers went over the intricate wrought-work and complicated bolts of the old oaken door, in an attempt to solve the secret of its fastening; and many and energetic were the comments on mediæval craftsmanship he gave utterance to as he paused from time to time to rub his bruised hands and snap his fingers in pain.

"Wait, I have got my matches! Let us have some light upon the scene. Hah! I thought so—I feared as much! Bad luck to the precautionary rascal who did it! See, where the bolt has been shot; and the key—it is missing! It is of no use my trying any further, Mabs, and it won't open to that piteous little look of yours if you were to sit down before it to eternity! Come, let us seek an exit through the hall into the courtyard, and on the footsteps of our melodramatic friends."

She obeyed him without a word, for her belief in his almost preternatural powers of protection were unbounded.

In this venture they met with a better success, for the vast banqueting-room, which they had no difficulty in reaching, lay grey and empty before them in the cold morning light; and, a small door under its lofty windows yielding readily to his pressure, they found themselves, to their delight, in the open and welcome light of day.

"Now for the portcullis gates! Get hold of my hand, little one. There is somebody on guard there—Breconridge, as I am alive!"

Never did the ancient major-domo appear so irritatingly obtuse as he did that morning to this young countryman of his, now rapidly beginning to lose his temper as a result of his recent failure to reach the castle grounds. In reply to a final and angry demand that the gates might be opened to them the former pointed obstinately and repeatedly to his riven mouth, as was his custom, shook his head in the direction of the upper castle, and then, folding his arms determinedly on his breast, composed himself on his stone sill as if to resume his disturbed slumbers.

"You won't! Very well, then, we shall see, my friend. Marion, you will remain here until I have seen Lady Diarrogh and expostulated with her on the gross impertinence of this fellow. He is evidently obeying her orders, and will not open to us until I bring him her ladyship's authority to do so."

The now thoroughly frightened young girl would have returned with him, and, indeed, she begged hard that she might be permitted to do so; but, alarmed at the trend of recent events, and fearful of again bringing her within the castle walls, he implored her to remain until he returned; and then, as though he dreaded the effect of her entreaties upon him, he turned and made for the hall at the top of his speed.

Scarcely had he left her, and before she was able to recall him, an attendant approached, and having summoned the major-domo to attend in the council chamber, proceeded to take up his predecessor's duties with the same insolence of demeanour, and a similar assumption of indifference to her repeated demands that the gate might be opened to her. And here, however reluctantly, the exigencies of narrative demand that we must leave her in her distress, and return to follow the fortunes of her true knight and our hero.

As he entered the castle and flew along its flagged hall, highly exasperated at his recent repulse, and revolving in his agitated mind how he might best seek audience of her ladyship at that unwonted hour of the day, young Darley became conscious of a figure standing within the low gothic doorway immediately before him, and presently, with an exclamation of surprised recognition, he hastened towards it, and stood panting and too much exhausted by his recent exertions to utter a word.

"Your movements in the courtyard, Señor Darley, were apparent to me from my window," said the occupant of the doorway quietly, and with the hauteur that had impressed him so deeply at their first meeting. "And, fearing some untoward result from your attitude to my major-domo, I was on my way here to remonstrate with you."

Was it possible! Could it be in order of things human, he asked himself, that this was the same woman who, on her knees to him in humiliation so manifest and utter, had pleaded to him so passionately for his lasting regard; and who now, with eyes of the coldest indifference, and words so dispassionate that they bordered on the contemptuous, stood there before him with the quiet unconcern of an entire stranger?

"Lady Diarrogh, I am at a loss to understand you! You were aware last night of our intention to leave this place at daybreak this morning, and I had naturally presumed that no obstacle would be placed in the way of our doing so. Why, then, this change—this inexplicable treatment of those to whom you have hitherto shown so much consideration?"

"It is the outcome of a better consideration, Señor Darley; a reconsideration induced by my solicitude for the affairs of my Spanish compatriots. It has been made apparent to myself and el Señor, my brother, that it would be of the supremest folly to permit one to leave the precincts of the castle who has become acquainted with the political transactions for which it is being made use of."

"Really, my Lady Diarrogh, this is intolerable! Do you wish me to forget myself—to abandon all the politeness due to a lady, in our further dealings? How could I know—what opportunity had I of learning, what was going on within this place, even had I felt disposed to interest myself in matters that do not in the least concern me? Take my word for it, now—my solemn oath on it, should you so desire it—that nothing of that which I may have seen or heard during my stay shall ever be touched upon by me to others. As for my cousin's silence on matters of which she knows nothing, it would, of course, be sheer nonsense to urge such a thing. I must insist on your permitting us to depart from here without another minute's delay."

Here was no chicken-hearted painter Suarez, cowering before the offended majesty of this pampered beauty like a cringing slave under the lash. The intrepid youngster, under a deep sense of the wrong done to him and the lady of his heart, was positively aglow with righteous anger as, with his lithe, graceful figure drawn to its full height, and the large earnest eyes burning with fiery zeal on his cousin's behalf, he stood before this masterful woman, the embodiment of consummate daring, and irritatingly indifferent to any consequences his attitude might bring upon him.

The spectacle appealed to the wild, lawless spirit of the woman with a force that was irresistible, and again her bosom heaved under the emotions thereby engendered, and the old light of love that had never ceased to burn under all this simulated indifference flashed out upon him with an intensity that should have been unmistakable to him, had his thoughts not been otherwise occupied.

"Señor Darley—Evelyn, it may not be," she replied with more amiability of tone. "Painful as a longer sojourn within my castle would appear to be to you, yet my brother——"

"But where is he?" broke in the youth with passionate abruptness. "Let me see him at once! Does he think for one moment that I am to be coerced at his bidding into remaining here, when I have made up my mind not to do so? Are there no laws in this country to punish those who would be disposed to wrongfully restrain an English subject on English land? He dare not! I defy him, and all his crew!"

"Hush!" she exclaimed, as two men at that moment entered the doorway opposite, and proceeded across the hall towards them. "Come with me behind this arras and utter no word; but regard them well as they pass, and I will tell you something afterwards that shall be to your benefit."

She drew him gently behind the old tapestry that hung on either side of the door, and, herself concealed, left him in a position to scrutinize the new-comers without being perceived by them.

As they approached, and the light from the tall windows fell upon them, he recognized, with some difficulty at first, the painter, Diego Suarez—so altered was he in appearance; his form bent, his head bowed upon his breast, and the marks of his recent encounter with Don Urbano very apparent on his face. Behind him stalked the herculean Breconridge, and it needed no great powers of observation for the youth to divine that the former was to all practical purposes a prisoner, and in the charge of this formidable warder.

"Well, Señor!" she observed with a triumphant smile, as the two men passed silently through the opening beside them. "Let me now tell you that this creature—this Suarez—whom you have noted in his dejection, did also dare to question our powers of restraint. A traitor to his sovereign, he would have gone further, and with his outgoing from us this day would have worked such mischief to the Carlist cause that the result would have been of the most disastrous nature. Yet, see how we have timely clipped his wings—we, whom you would thus wantonly hold in defiance!"

"He was a poltroon—the basest of curs to have rendered so shabby a return to his benefactress for her patronage!" replied the youth energetically, "and I have little or no sympathy with the fellow in his present condition—much less any wish to mention such a matter outside. But I must tell you again, Lady Diarrogh, that these affairs have little if any interest for me, and I don't see how this incident can in any way influence my going, now that I most heartily desire it."

"Evelyn," she replied softly, and reverting to her old methods of caressing tenderness, "hear me again, and believe me that what I now say to you is irrevocable. I have told you, *mi querido*, in terms that to your English ears must have appeared strange—mayhap unmaidenly—that I loved you. But I had not told you all, cruel one, believing—fondly hoping—that your replies were given at first hand, without reflection, and that you might yet, at this last moment, be inclined to alter your decision to leave me. Alas! I have seen only too well that it may not be so, and I, too—for I am not also without the pride of my ancestors—have decided with equal resolution to maintain my point—to consummate my wish. You shall *not* leave this place—yes, Evelyn, I repeat it—until we shall both pass out of it, for ever, should you wish it, as husband and wife! Think you, then, that I would consent to remain here, condemned to suffer in silence the pangs your absence would bring to me, without some effort to resist so great a calamity? No, for I will make you love me, *mi rubio*—my life shall be devoted to it—it has been foretold of the Fates that it must be so—and I shall succeed. Why do you remain blind to the consequences you would bring upon yourself by thus spurning one who would give up her position, affairs, friends, her very life to make you happy? Why, I say, do you commit this crime against reason in order to pursue the chimera of a love that is not—that can never be—worthy of you?"

"Oh, Lady Diarrogh, what folly is this?" he exclaimed with genuine pain, but with none of his former confusion at her disconcerting candour. "Have I not emphatically said that this thing must not be further discussed? It is unwomanly of you in the extreme to do so, for it places me in a position whence I cannot reply to you without giving you offence—and that, Heaven knows, is the last thing I would wish. I have liked you—very much, and do so still, and I would desire to preserve that feeling between us; but flattered—honoured, as I cannot help being by your sentiments towards me, my heart and hand are pledged to my cousin, Miss Wilton, and by her it is my wish to staunchly remain.

I beg that you will further favour me by giving such orders to your attendants that we may leave this place at once. My cousin is at the inner gates in the intensest alarm, and if you have any pity in your heart for her feelings, you will not prolong a state of affairs that may have the most serious consequences for her!"

"*Caramba,* I care not for her—this mere child! She will remain here with you—for the present!"

"And is this really your intention, madam?"

"Indubitably!"

"Then I tell you, Lady Diarrogh, I will force my way out from here at all hazards, and woe betide anyone who shall endeavour to stay me!"

This Quixotic resolve, delivered with considerable unction, was greeted with a low, mocking laugh by his companion, whose temper had taken fire at his, as she stood with folded arms and half-closed eyes watching his every movement intently.

"Are you not a little too late, Señor?" she added with a sneer as he turned to leave her, at the same moment that the opposite doorway was darkened, and the muffled forms of the Spanish conspirators filed into the hall.

"We shall see, Lady Diarrogh, for even they—no, nor thrice their number shall hinder me!"

He strode off determinedly across the hall, with the first intention of avoiding, if possible, a collision with these fiery and accommodating gentlemen, and then, having reached the portcullis gates, to intimidate the person in charge into opening them; for his Saxon blood was now thoroughly up, with the knowledge of this trap into which he had fallen, and he was rendered additionally embittered by the thought that it was he who, against his cousin's wishes, had first induced her to enter it with him.

At a signal from the *châtelaine,* which was unseen by him, the conspirators immediately drew themselves together and formed a line across the entrance way, with the evident intention of barring his further progress, and at the same instant a shrill cry of alarm—his Marion's voice—from without fell upon his ears and caused him, with desperation, to redouble his speed until he came up with them.

"The door, gentlemen—I would pass. Hinder me not, I beg of you!"

The vigorous motion of his hand that accompanied the words was not to be misunderstood, even if the latter were unintelligible to them. It was a critical moment, and in the breathless silence that followed the voice of Rufina del Montefuego was heard, bidding them at all cost to harm him not.

Bending his courtly figure with a smile of false politeness, and pointing in the direction of the Doña Rufina, Don Fabricio del Monte, who in the absence of his chief, Don Domingo, appeared to have taken the lead, gave the indignant youth to understand, by gestures most emphatic, that it was her wish, seconded by himself and his companions, that he should remain where he was.

The moment for action had arrived sooner than the youth had expected, and the odds to be encountered were greater than he had at first seriously anticipated. Yet nothing daunted, and with clenched hands, he was advancing deliberately to the attack, when his opponent, with a quick movement that was followed by his companions, drew a long, narrow-bladed sword from its sheath under his voluminous cloak and confronted him threateningly with its point.

"Have at you, Señor *Inglès!*" he observed in tones of quiet defiance as he divested himself of his cloak and threw it aside. "Here have you no Señor Breconridge to encounter, I can promise you. Don Urbano, this is my affair, I beg you will leave the Señor to me—giving him your sword; for I would meet him on equal terms!"

But the desperate youth had already anticipated them, and, with a quick glance over his shoulder, had made a break across the hall to the side whereon a number of weapons of every shape and age were hanging. Here, having selected and wrenched a huge cavalry sabre from its dusty scabbard, he was about to return to meet his adversaries when Rufina del Montefuego appeared at his side in extreme agitation at the unexpectedly dangerous turn of affairs, and laid her hand imploringly on his arm.

"What insanity is this? Forbear, Evelyn. Do you not see that any further resistance to these *caballeros* would place you in peril of your life? Desist, I beg of you, and I will see to it that you are not harmed!"

Intercede for them, rather, madam!" he retorted with a reckless laugh, as he tried the temper of the old weapon with his knee, bending it against the pavement. "This day's work is of your doing, remember. Let the result lie to your charge!"

Wrenching himself from her grasp he ran swiftly towards the threatening group, foremost among whom, with a consummate coolness of demeanour, stood Don Fabricio, sword in hand, and feet implanted in readiness to resist his onslaught.

"Put up your swords, gentlemen! Don Fabricio, I command you to desist! He must be disarmed! What, Señor, dare you to disobey me?"

It was the voice of the alarmed mistress of the castle as she hastened to join them.

"*Sapristi,* madam, my cousin, would you have me lower my sword to a barbarian who would infallibly take me at a disadvantage? Not so! Fall to, Señor *Inglès.* I will sustain the honour of these Señores in person. *Vamos con Dios!*"

The youth's very ignorance of swordsmanship and the passion of despair that filled him as he remembered his cousin's cry of distress, and connected it with Don Domingo's absence, stood him in good stead in the contest, short and sharp, that immediately ensued. For, expert though the Spaniard soon showed himself to be in the art of fence, he had yet to become acquainted with the danger involved in dealing with an adversary uncertain in attack, and in his blind fury trusting rather to the swashing blow than to *finesse*. It was therefore at that moment, when his cousin would have thrown herself between them at the risk of receiving a dangerous wound, that the luckless Don Fabricio, his sombrero struck from his head by the terrible blow that now stood recorded in the livid and far-extending gash that disfigured his brow, staggered backwards, and, dropping his sword from his paralyzed hand, sank incontinently to the ground.

Then as the triumphant youth, taking advantage of the disorder into which the group was thrown by this misadventure, was about to spring for the door, a trenchant blow on the head, dealt him from behind by the major-domo, who had entered the hall at this juncture, rendered him completely unconscious, and he fell heavily forward into the outstretched arms of Rufina del Montefuego.

CHAPTER XV.

SCARCE ONE STEP FROM THE DUNGEON TO THE ALTAR.

When, again, the unfortunate youth returned to consciousness, the cruel blow that had bereft him of it rendered him still unable of volition to move hand or foot in his attempt to rise, and he lay for a considerable period in a helpless condition on the pallet to which he had been consigned—his eyes wandering amazedly about the half-darkened chamber, as he endeavoured by might and main to awaken his stunned wits into some lucid account of events that had led to his presence in so strange a place.

The room itself, so far as he could see by the light from a small shaded lamp that stood on a table beside him, was of extremely limited dimensions, with walls apparently of solid rock, coated and smeared with the dust and grime of centuries; and high above him, on the opposite side to that on which his bed was placed, appeared a narrow window—a mere slit in the rockery, rough-glazed, and stoutly barred with ironwork. But of daylight there was not a vestige from without, leading him to infer that it was night-time, and, also, that the livid glare that played at intervals through the opening, followed by distant rumbling sounds, denoted the progress of a storm.

Little by little his powers of movement began to return to him, and, with them, a gradual awakening of his senses to a full knowledge of the occurrences of the morning—for it was to be surmised that his stupor was of no longer duration, and with a prolonged groan of intense pain he roused himself into a sitting position on the side of the bed, and proceeded ruefully to survey the appointments of his cell, for such it undoubtedly was. Then, as his full vigour of body returned, and his brain cleared, he set about at once to devise some means of escape from his prison.

In the dim light that prevailed he had been able to discover that there were two doors to the cell, facing one another, and at right angles to the window. The larger one, and that apparently in present use, was of the stoutest oak quartering, garnished with mediæval scrolls of iron, and of a strength that no effort on his part—and he had flung the full weight of his body against it in the attempt—could affect in the least degree. The other, which he now proceeded, lamp in hand, to examine, was wholly of iron, but of such unusually small dimensions that it might easily have been mistaken for a mere casing to some disused fireplace, were it not for the powerful hinges, the ancient lock, and the heavy bolts that were shot into the stone jambs on three of its sides. Yet, notwithstanding the position of these bolts and hinges, there was every indication that this door opened outwardly and from him.

Without a moment's delay, and undeterred by the fact that a thick coating of cobwebs denoted years, if not ages, of permanent closure, Evelyn Darley set to work to release the bolts from their positions, utilising every available article of furniture within the cell in the attempt. And after half an hour's persistent work, at the cost of a broken nail and some abrasions to the skin, he eventually succeeded. Then seizing a heavy joint-stool that had hitherto stood him in good stead during his operations, he proceeded to batter on the old iron plate with the might of fury, until the cell echoed again under the weight of his blows; but, alas! without the least response of movement on the part of this locked and sturdy relic of a workmanlike age.

Pausing for some seconds to recover breath he retired the entire length of the cell, and then launched himself against the door with an impetus that would have infallibly burst the fastenings of many a more modern and jerry-built prototype; yet here again without any better result than a considerably bruised hip, a jarred system, and a return of the excruciating pains to his head.

There now remained but the window, and to this he forthwith dragged the heavy square table that occupied a large part of the cell, and, mounting upon it, brought his head to a level with the time-corroded bars and adamant panes that guarded the opening. It needed but a glance to convince him that any attempt to escape in this direction would be equally futile; and, recognizing this, he had perforce to descend and return to the bedside, there to sit and there to bar out, if such a thing were possible, all thought of his cousin and her hapless position; otherwise he felt that to dwell upon so terrible a theme, in his then distracted condition of mind, would inevitably tend to subvert reason itself. Yet would her sweet face, despite his best endeavours, refuse to remain away from him, and her last piteous cry of distress cease to ring in his ears; and it was with the double object of escaping from these heart-breaking manifestations, and to project fresh schemes for flight, that he sprang to his feet and proceeded to pace the floor of the cell rapidly to and fro, pausing at frequent intervals at the larger door to listen for any indication of approaching footsteps.

It was during one of these moments of rest, and as he stood with his head pressed to the heavy portal—partly to assuage the throes of his beating brain, and partly to assist him in detecting some outside movement—that a sound, as of a gentle tapping, came to him from the opposite side of the chamber.

In that direction he now flew with an exclamation of the profoundest joy, for, intuitively, he seemed to feel that this movement must indicate the presence close at hand of some friendly person—possibly the unhappy Suarez, or even the Doña Mercedes herself—bent on securing his release.

To his answering knock the soft tapping suddenly ceased, and immediately afterwards, and to his unmitigated delight, the iron head of an enormous key was slipped gently into the lock from without, and gradually filled the aperture on the inner side. Listening intently he could distinguish the sound of a bolt being slowly and laboriously withdrawn, followed by another, and yet another—a long pause supervening, as if the invisible friend, exhausted by his, or her, efforts, was in the act of resting. Then under his eyes the key began slowly to revolve within the lock until the bolt went back into its unaccustomed home with a loud rasping shock that appeared to have startled the mysterious turnkey himself, for the sound of a falling bar, which had apparently been used as a lever, came simultaneously to the youth's ears as he stood silently wishing his deliverer God-speed in his venture.

After another and longer spell of utter silence the gentle signal was again repeated, and the youth, divining of instinct its meaning and what was now required of him, placed his powerful young shoulders against the ironwork, and by dint of a tremendous effort pushed the door slowly outwards upon its hinges. And as he sprang back into his cell out of the utter darkness beyond, half fearing that his reception might not be of so friendly a nature as he at first had been led to surmise, he was immediately and closely followed into the light by no less a person than the chaplain of the castle, the venerable Padre Benito.

The look of supreme benevolence and sincere pity that shone on the face of this truly good old man as he stood before the youth, so overwrought of mind, and fearing the worst, went directly to his heart with a consolatory effort so overwhelming that he sank on his knee before him in an attitude of the deepest veneration.

" Have no fear, my son," said his would-be deliverer in gentle tones, as he laid a benedictory hand on young Darley's disordered curls, and smiled cheerily down at his upraised face. " The lock and bolts were stubborn enough to the efforts of an old man, but I came prepared, and, *Gracias a Dios,* I have overcome them! Ah! the murderous rogues! how they have abused this poor head. See, here is water in this basin, pray you to let me bathe it for you—this bruised forehead. No? Then arise with this blessing, my son, and come with me out of this most loathsome place. Yes, yes, I know what you would enquire."

" Marion—Miss Wilton, Father! Oh, tell me, have you brought news of her? Is she in danger? You, of all others, would know of her; for are you not the good Father Benito of whom she loved to speak? Tell me truly, Father, for your face would seem to augur strange tidings! "

"Courage, my son. She is indeed in God's safe keeping, beyond the touch of the most irreligious hand amongst the misguided ones of this ill-fated place!"

"Dead!"

He would have fallen under the weight of the calamitous blow the misconstrued words had imparted had not the old priest hastened to his aid.

"Not so, my son! You have sadly misunderstood, for she is alive and well, though naturally much worn by grief and her anxiety as to your whereabouts and safety. Have courage of heart, then, my son, and continue your trust in Him who has vouchsafed to utilize these aged limbs for your deliverance, and who of His all-abiding mercy did guide this dear child to the sanctuary of His house, where, pursued by el Señor del Montefuego, and shrieking—this poor lamb—she had directed her steps in the wildest of terror and calling upon my name! Yea, even to the very altar itself, before which I was at my devotions, did this impious man pursue her to seize her in his sacrilegious arms and drag her therefrom. And in this baseness of design he would have persisted had not the sacred symbol—the holy cross—upheld to him in all solemness, and the words—words that I trust I may never again have cause to utter—driven him abashed from her side. Señor, I see you are impatient, you would at once see her. Yet must it be with proper caution, that she may not in her condition be too unduly excited, for I have not dared to inform her of your position until I had ascertained the room in which you lay, and had succeeded in actually conveying you to her. Come, then, with me and verify the truth of my words. But give me first your hand, for the crypt is of a midnight darkness, and its deviations are known now only to me. Come!"

Closing the iron door quietly upon them, after first having taken the precaution to extinguish the lamp, they entered the crypt hand in hand together, amidst a darkness so profound that its effect on the youth was of the most depressing nature.

"We are now, my son, under the chapel itself," whispered the voice of the priest close to his ear, as they groped their way onward and apparently downward. "And the place to which this descent will lead is the burial vault of the Diarroghs. Here, to the left, under my hand, is already the tomb of the good Sir Balefred—whom Jesu assoil! He was of the most devout of good men, and would assuredly have sternly discountenanced the wayward proceedings of his lady and her household had he been yet with us. *Benedicte dominum omnes electi ejus!* Forwards, my son! Here have you naught to fear but the poor bones of a vanished house. Still have you right, for it is indeed of a profound and deathful quiet. Yet even to this must we all arrive—as inevitably as the leaf that falls and is compounded of the general mould. Heed, therefore, the lesson, my child, lest of your young blood's riot a day shall come when death and dissolution, as we have it here, may constitute a never-ceasing terror for your declining years. Now, mark you yon light that glimmers but faintly before us? It is the entry from the chapel, and *Gracias a Dios*, our journey's end."

The floor of the crypt now began to incline steeply upwards under their cautious steps, until the small door that appeared above them was reached, and here a short flight of stone steps conducted them into the chancel of the chapel itself.

Still holding the priest by the hand, his eyes bedazzled by the long-absent light, the youth was conducted to the back of the altar, which, with its immediate surroundings, was fully illuminated as if for High Mass; and there, to his inexpressible joy, on an extemporised couch, and in an attitude of profound slumber, lay the one dearest object of all his solicitude—Marion Wilton.

"Hush! awake her not, my son," whispered the priest as the youth, with an uncontrollable impulse, was about to touch her hand. "Not too abruptly, for I would have had her sleep well, that her strength may be recouped for the further venture which it will be my duty to unfold to you."

"One kiss, Father—just one, I implore you! See the tear-marks on those poor wan cheeks. I would I had the unfeeling villain here who induced them to flow, and I would serve him as efficiently as I did his cousin. See, I will not awake her!"

But his voice, low and tremulous as it was with suppressed feeling, had nevertheless reached her ears in her dreams, and with a wild cry of "Evelyn, where are you, my love?" she sprang up from the couch and was immediately caught to his bosom in a transport of rapturous joy.

Then there ensued one of those delightful little intervals of mutual congratulation and tender solicitude, so obviously natural to lovers, during which the good old man beside them evinced symptoms of the liveliest, if too mundane, satisfaction: now helping himself prodigiously to snuff, anon wiping his eyes with his coatsleeve as if dust alone were the object, and finally regarding them both with head askew and a smile of supreme benignity on his refined features, as though he were appraising a moral subject by an approved old master.

"Hey-day! have we now done, my children?" he presently enquired with a quizzical smile that came as a streak of sunlight across his pale, thin face. "Come, then, and let us further discuss this your position, amongst us of the castle. How say you, Señor Darley? Let me put it to you thus shortly. On the one hand have we the Señores, my countrymen, intensely embittered at the severe wound inflicted on el Señor del Monte by your hand in self-defence; and who, if

I know their dispositions well, may at any moment break from her ladyship's restraint and seek to do you some terrible hurt. I need not mention the fact revealed to me by the Señorita Mercedes that, in any case, your retention at her ladyship's pleasure may be an indefinitely prolonged one, for she seems in her madness to have elected to defy all the laws, both statutory and moral, and what further steps she and her hot-head brother may take it passes the wit of man to foretell. That, Señor, is the position within the castle! On the other hand, the night is wild; an equinoctial storm rages outside with a virulence seldom witnessed by these old eyes; there is lightning incessant, and the rain also streams unceasingly. Suffering from the effects of a blow so cowardly dealt to you this morning, and deprived of the sleep that should follow your indisposition, you are not of too robust a state of body, my son, to encounter the elements on such a night as this, much less is your young *noviasita*, here, fitted for so terrible an exposure to wet and cold. Let me not influence you in your decision, for this poor distracted old head has long since ceased to adjudicate on affairs outside the offices of the Church. Yet my heart—the brain's mistress, whose importunities it seldom refuses—would have you stay until to-morrow night, when the storm will have subsided, though the attempt at flight would then be rendered doubly perilous by the means that would be taken to prevent it as soon as your presence here will have been ascertained. But of this rest assured, my children, while you remain here with me in this holy place you will not be harmed."

"Marion," said the youth, as he still held her affectionately to his side, "what do you say? Would you venture the attempt to escape to-night—at once, if Father Benito were to give us the means?"

"Where you go I will go, Evelyn; and as you bid me do, so will I obey," she replied, looking up at him with a world of sweet confidence in her eyes.

"Enough—we will venture it, Father. Let us set about it at once."

"May God the all-seeing watch over you, my children," observed the old man fervently. "For I believe that you have elected for the best, and that this tempest may be a means to that good end which He, of His infinite wisdom, has ordained!"

From an old curtained wardrobe, in the corner of the sanctuary, he brought forth a heavy, hooded cloak, which he proceeded, with tremulous hands, to adjust about the shoulders and head of the young girl; and the youth having persistently refused all wrappings on the plea that his movements in the event of attack would be impeded thereby, the old man departed in the direction of the belfry, from whence he returned presently, dragging with him a coil of rope, which he threw down before them with an air of exultation.

"It is of good strength, my son, and from the appearance of this iron hook, attached to one end, would seem to have performed a similar duty on more than one occasion. Come with me now, and softly through the transept. Your absence has not yet been detected, or they would at once have sought you here."

Carrying the rope on his shoulder, with the young girl close at his side, Evelyn Darley, guided by the old priest, passed through the transept and along a covered way into the outer castle.

"Your hand, my son, and hold you that of the maiden," whispered Padre Benito as they emerged suddenly into darkness. "For this is an obscure and seldom used passage, and we must not run any risk of being parted."

In this formation they resumed their journey in an atmosphere of chilling dampness, and without a sound to break the stillness but their own soft footfalls and eager breathings.

An exclamation of satisfaction from the priest and the slight noise of a moving hinge presently apprised them of their arrival at the end of the passage, and pressing closely behind him the youthful couple found themselves in an empty and spacious apartment, dimly revealed in the feeble light from its solitary window, yet whose every cranny was filled, shortly after their entry, by a vivid flash of lightning that lit up and displayed, outstretched before them, in one terrible second, not only the castle grounds, but the teeming landscape for many a mile round.

"*Ave Maria!*" muttered the aged priest, crossing himself devoutly as the snarling crash that immediately followed deepened into a prolonged roar that seemed to shake the solid masonry to its foundations. "How say you, my son? Is not the weather too inclement? Had we not better retrace our steps to the chapel?"

"Not for worlds, Father!" replied the youth with energy. "My cousin—Miss Wilton—will not hear of it, and the opportunity is far too tempting to be now refused."

"The words of a brave youth—an Englishman, and one worthy of so intrepid and faithful a companion. Bring then forward the rope." He went to the window and threw it open—the rain, as he did so, beating in on them in torrents with the gale. "It is in length about thirty feet, and will reach the moat within a foot or two. Attach the hook here to the sill, and throw the coil outward. You are strong of arm, and will support the light weight of this tender one, whom I will assist from the window when you have first swung your body to the rope. The latter you will retain in your hand after you have descended and until I cast the hook outwards to you, for you will need it in your further attempt to scale the high boundary wall, which must be at a point well to the left of the lodge.

The village lies some three miles to the right on the high road. You will proceed there at once and seek shelter. Have no fear, my son, for the moat is of no great depth at this point, and may easily be forded.

"I will not bid you farewell, my children," he added, as his eyes became suffused with tears, and his voice sank to a mere whisper under his emotions. "Rather let it be *Au revoir,* for I would fain see you again. You have become dear to me of your sweet compassion for my age. And I will, if my life is preserved of God, seek you out, and further relate to you the events that will follow your departure. Yet," he added in some alarm as the thought occurred to him, "you will doubtless with your renewed liberty have recourse to the authorities—to the outraged law, in vindication of this indignity which you and yours have suffered at the hands of my countrymen. Undoubtedly you will be within your right in doing so. And yet, I loved her—and do so even now, in all her headstrong folly, this poor misguided daughter, who as an infant underwent baptism at these hands, and who as a bright and happy child I have dandled many and many is the time on these knees. I repeat you will do this——"

"Never, Father!" broke in the maiden impetuously. "Evelyn, we could never be so base as to do such a thing! Once free, we shall never bring our lips to utter a word of our mishaps in Tarnworth. You will promise it, Evelyn, will you not—for this poor old man's sake, who may by this very act have saved our lives and imperilled his own?"

"I will swear it!" returned the youth with equal fervour, as he held out his hand to the old priest in farewell. "For your sake, Father, these events shall be as of a dream—never to be recalled until that fair day when we shall meet again—let us hope under happier circumstances. There is the address of my father's home. We shall look forward to your arrival with infinite delight!"

Pressing his lips to the youth's forehead in grateful acknowledgment of his undertaking, and wishing him all prosperity in his perilous adventure, the old priest turned to the young girl and escorted her to the window—outside which the youth had already sustained his weight on the pendant rope.

"Come, my dear child, and have no fear, for not the elements at war—no, nor all the evil machinations of man, shall harm the little head which I now do bless! Farewell—nay, I had forgotten—*Au revoir!*"

He kissed her pale cheek with reverential tenderness, and then, having assisted her from the window, and seen her arms safely bestowed about her lover's neck, stood looking down in the intervals of blinding light and profound gloom, as the youth, hand over hand, and by sheer strength of muscle, descended with her to the moat, into which he dropped to the waist, without, however, losing his foothold amid its stagnant waters.

When, again, they looked upwards after they had gained the opposite bank they saw him standing at the storm-lit window, his long white hair tossed by the winds, his hands and eyes upturned to heaven, and his aged lips moving in fervent prayer.

CHAPTER XVI.

"EVELYN, LOOK BUT ONCE UPON ME!"

Terrifying of din, and of a destructive fury beyond memory, that autumn night's storm will be discussed by the gossips of Tarnworth and the neighbouring hamlets when the subversion of governments shall have been forgotten.

Throughout the evening, and from a period shortly following upon the escape of Evelyn Darley and Marion Wilton from the castle, lights might have been seen going and coming within its extensive range of windows and upon its terrace, and even within the lower grounds, as though some event of an unusual nature had occurred to disturb the normal quiet of the inmates. And more than once were the lodge gates opened by the attendant major-domo to impatient horsemen, cloaked, booted, and spurred, who rode furiously away into the storm, and along the torrential highway in the direction of Tarnworth village.

And as these midnight cavaliers, with bent heads under their wide-flapped hats, thundered past the boundary wall of the castle grounds, their movements appeared to form a subject of considerable interest to a solitary individual standing beneath a tree in the forest that bordered the roadside.

"What can it all mean! It is inexplicable to me!" he muttered, as he bent suddenly forward to catch the features of a rider who at that instant was involved in a blinding flash of light that sprang from the heavens with an intense brilliancy that seemed to revivify the day. "That was surely Don Fabricio del Monte, his head bound up, and his face of a deathly pallor. Surely she cannot have been so mad as to have sent them out with the object of intercepting those unfortunate children! I cannot believe it, for they would first have come to me—to Lovell—to enquire if I had met with them. Have I done right in giving them the shelter the young girl craved of me so piteously when, exhausted by his efforts to escape, and the ill-treatment he had undergone, I found him insensible beneath yon wall with the poor little lassie, his sweetheart, wringing her hands over him in her despair? I might have summoned the major-domo and had them conveyed into the castle if—if the child had not looked at me in the way she did with those tearful and beseeching eyes. Have I done right in this? I trust to God I have, for much as I would venture for her ladyship's sake I would yet stop at murder, and what else would this surrender of them have meant but murder of the most cruel kind? No, it has been for the best. She was warned of me to desist from this folly, and she laughed my words to scorn. Let the result not be without its lesson to her—and to me, for I would willingly wash my hands of it all before it may yet be too late. Merciful Heaven! who is that who has ventured into the wood, and who is now proceeding in their direction?"

He darted swiftly away into the undergrowth with the object of intercepting a cloaked figure that seemed to have sprung from the highway at his side, and was now making its way along a narrower path leading directly to his dwelling within the forest.

As he gained the pathway within a few paces of the small cabin, from whose tiny window a light shone faintly through the descending torrents, the mysterious figure was already close upon him; and as he threw himself in front of it to stay its further progress a dazzling and sustained stream of fire illuminated its face—rain-soaked, ghastly in its pallor, and with eyes set in a frenzied stare of unspeakable woe: the face of one hovering on the borderland of insanity, and amenable to little, if any, restraint of reasoning from others: the face of one who would hesitate at no act, however terrible, to which, of premeditation, its possessor were committed: the face of an Alecto: the face of Rufina del Montefuego—Lady Diarrogh!

"Stand apart—I will not be denied—I will not be resisted, Lovell! He is there—I know it! Your attitude has betrayed it! Remove from my path, man! Nay, you shall not hinder me!"

She endeavoured frantically to evade him, but he had thrown one powerful arm about her, and held her dripping form tightly to his side.

"What madness is this, my lady? What is this you would do? No, no, you shall not be unloosed—I would save you. Hearken to me, daughter——"

"I will not listen—I care not! Lovell, I implore you to let me see her——"

"Hah! Would you seek to harm her——"

"Let me go, I repeat to you! What care I for her, who has dared to come between me and my love! They are there—within yon hut—within reach, and I would confront them. Beseech you, kind Lovell, to let me but see them once more. Ah! thought you we were smitten then? What have you to do with fear, my faithful adherent, when I have none of it in my heart? See—yon oak—'twas struck, and riven falls in fragments to the earth, whereon I would these sore-despised poor limbs were with them laid. Aye, rattle your loudest, ye blinding messengers of perdition, for your presence has no terrors for me! Come, my faithful and ever attentive servidor, Don Eduardo Lovell, I pray of you to escort me to the presence of my love; for they have all—all forsaken me in my distress—these pusillanimous lip-servants, and flee in terror to the ports to preserve their miserable bones from my true love's vengeance: my brother—false brother—Don Fabricio—Urbano, the courtly Don Saturnino, so withered of heart—Suarez, the artist—no less perfidious—to whom I have also opened the door—all—all—all!"

"Heaven preserve us! her reason is going!" muttered the old man alarmedly, as he bent closely to observe her features. "Daughter, you are over-distressed of mind, and your body is soaked from head to foot in this storm, and trembles with the cold. Come, come, let your friend, your faithful Lovell, take you back to the castle and to warmth——"

"To the castle—no; never—never—never more! You are old, my timid Lovell, and speak out of your infirmities. You are also wise in divination. Hearken, then, to this foretelling—yet scorn it not:—

When the owl, the stoat, and the night-wolf prowl,
And the dead man shines i' the mould:
When children sigh, and ban-dogs howl,
'Tis a fearsome time for the old—
Heigh-ho!
'Tis a fearsome time for the old!

"Say not the worms so? Pray you, then, look to it well, my aged Lovell, for 'twill come—'twill come.

When night-sweat falls from sycamore bough;
When death-watch hath foretold;
When the deep gives pause 'twixt ebb and flow,

'Tis a gruesome hour for the old—
Heigh-ho!
'Tis a gruesome hour for the old!

"Ponder it well, my decrepit friend, for it outweighs all the mere babble of palms. Surely you are not. then, afraid of me, as was my pretty Evelyn, who rests beyond. It was a cruel blow, and fell with equal heaviness upon my heart as I caught him in these arms, and wept over him, cursing his assailant for his inhumanity. *Santa Maria!* how tender, soft, yet brilliant, is this violet light that lifts the pall from off my aching eyes, and shows to me your face, my poor Lovell, so filled with commiseration for—what? I do not weep. I may not weep, though fain I would, while tears are yet the tribute of weakling fools. Conduct me then to the presence of these unfortunates—I would bid them farewell. See, I would not harm them!" She drew some glittering object from her bosom and with her disengaged hand threw it amidst the shrubbery. "I know not how it came there! Was I mad? Peradventure it were so, and I knew it not. Oh, reason, thou truant and most villainous defaulter, come thou nearer till I grapple thee yet closer! Knowest thou of a God, my divining friend? Thou answerest me in the affirmative, yet standest appalled when thus His sulphurous bolts are hurled about thine ears! Hasten thee to the chapel, and bid the good Father Benito intercede for you, for your soul's good. Hark! my love is calling. It is wondrous dark, and the moon, alas, is down! Again! Heard you it not, *amigo?* It seemed of the air, so dulcet and fantastical, like fairy strains through meadow-buds soft blown."

"He called not, my lady; you are but indisposed of mind. The rain beats pitilessly down upon your face, and we are in peril standing here exposed to the lightning's rays. There can come no good of your seeing them in your present state of excitement. Come!"

"Nay, but whither, my honest friend? Shall he not be answered? You would not be so impolite as to drag these poor aching limbs from hence, would you, my Lovell? Fie, fie; it were most cavalier!

Dear, my love, O turn thee smiling,
By thine eyes I'll quit thee vain
If, withal this sore beguiling,
Dear, my love, thou 'lt turn again!

You are grieved, my sturdy henchman. There are tears in your eyes! So, so, let me stroke thy cheeks; for you would not have me cruel and dismiss thee for this manifestation of puling weakness, my poor Lovell!

Yester-e'en, within yon alcove,
By those lips that sealed thy trow,
Sure thou took me for thy true-love,
Dear, my love, O turn thee now!

But why stays the good Father Benito? He would intercede for me, and abjure you by the Cross I so wantonly contemned to deny me not this small boon I beg of you."

Touched to the heart by her abject condition, and the rambling words ever circling the theme so dear to her distraught mind, the gipsy took her by the hand and led her towards the hut.

"They are tired, my lady, exhausted by their efforts to escape from the castle, and I would not have them disturbed. You will solemnly promise me, then, to do no more than look in upon them from the window. On this point I must have your assurance before we proceed further."

"Yes, yes, indeed, Lovell! You have my promise most inviolate," she returned with feverish haste as she pressed her lips to his great rough hand. "I would not harm them, I would utter no syllable to disturb their repose. I am not mad as you would believe me to be. I am fevered, semi-delirious, very, very ill. There is a fiercely burning weight here upon my brain that lifts slowly with the dispersing elements. Lead on, and I will faithfully do as you bid me."

The storm, which had culminated, and exhausted its remaining forces over the forest-land as they stood but slightly sheltered from its virulence under a neighbouring tree, now drew slowly away, and, as they reached the gipsy's cabin, the moon appeared suddenly in a rift of the clouds and shone down upon Lovell and his companion with a brightness as of the day.

Stepping softly to the window he took out his handkerchief, and, wiping the clinging raindrops from its panes, bade her, in a whisper, to look within.

Silently obeying him, her eager eyes went at once to a low trestle bed at the opposite side of the cabin, where, by the light of a small lamp on a chair by the side of it, the figure of young Darley was clearly revealed, lying in an attitude of deep sleep, his arms crossed and supporting his head, and his face half turned to the outer side of the bed, where, in silent prayer, the young girl knelt beside him with clasped hands and moving lips, and her eyes riveted upon his restful face.

Long and fondly did the wretched woman continue to feast her eyes on this truly idyllic scene, and, as she did so, the gipsy, her companion, fearing for her mind, noted with joy that, with the reaction the sight had induced, the tears at last were beginning to flow down her storm-beaten cheeks.

"Courage, my daughter, it is of such things as these that the heart must learn to forget," he observed with unwonted kindness of voice, as, sobbing violently, she suffered him to lead her away.

"Forget!"

She had paused in the moonlight, passing her hand weariedly over her troubled brow, with a look of heart-rending incredibility at his words, and now retiring slowly and reluctantly, with her face to the window, she repeated the word over and over again, as though she were endeavouring to bring its meaning within the scope of her distracted mind.

Suddenly, and in a horrifying whisper, such as sleep-walkers will utter in the still of night, she enquired—

"Lovell, the dead forget, do they not?"

"The dead are oblivious to all, my lady. Let us be journeying homewards."

"Yet am I dead—of heart and of soul, and must I needs remember? Lovell, would thy devotion move thee to release me of this cumbrance?"

"Thy God forfend, my lady. Such fearful thoughts are but for the wicked."

"Yet am I of the wickedest of God's earth, and must I for ever remember?"

"Turn your thoughts to devotion, daughter. It will bring to you the consolation you so sorely need. It is but the cowards of this earth who seek the doubtful refuge that death extends to them. Come with me to the good Father Benito; for you have long turned a deaf ear to his ministrations, and he will not repulse you, even now."

She gazed at him long and fixedly, her hands fumbling aimlessly at her sides, and the old disordered look in her staring eyes.

"Dear old Father Benito, of the kindly face and snowy hair! Yet I like him not, Lovell, he takes snuff and tells truths! And must I to him? Nay, nay, I will stay without, here, and weep to yon moon—poor withered goddess of blighted lovers; for she heard him vow that mine eyes shone none the less sweetly. Go, Lovell—leave me. I would reason of this mild philosopher who permits such things to be."

"I beseech you, my lady, to come with me to the castle."

"I charge you with equal solemness, Señor Lovell, to remain, and watch by the side of my sleeping love. Listen to me, old friend," she suddenly added coaxingly, and dropping her voice to the unearthly whisper that had at first so shocked him, "I will promise you not to return to your abode. That is your fear, is it not? Then rest assured, for I will keep my word to you, as I did at yon window. But, in turn, you must leave—I will suffer no further restraint; for I am fleet of movement, and would fly upon the wings of night to do—the thing you would not have me do. Have a care, *amigo mio!* I am pained of head beyond tolerance, and would stoutly resist this further cruelty."

"And you will return to the castle, my lady?"

"Possibly, my friend," she replied with a vacant smile, rendered all the more uncanny by the persistent whisper that preceded it. "I will try. I did not promise you that. You will now leave me. Yes?"

With a look of unutterable sorrow at the poor half-demented creature, still so beautiful in all her misery, and yet preserving a remnant of that audacity of purpose that contributed so much to it, he turned reluctantly from her, and made his way homewards. Scarcely had he disappeared in the intricacies of the forest path than with a loud hysterical peal of laughter she darted back into the thicket, and with hands gesticulating wildly at the moon, and crooning snatches of incoherent song, she proceeded, regardless of thorn and briar, in a circle through the forest, having for its centre the hovel in which the unconscious cause of all her woes lay peacefully sleeping.

* * * * * *

And all throughout that long bright night and unto the verge of dawn did she continue those weirdful peregrinations, seldom appearing on the high road, as though she feared her searching attendants, whose voices she had ofttimes heard, might recognize her, and deter her from the one object for which she had so persistently stayed. And now, as the cold moon faded down to westward, and the chilling winds of the dawn arose, she lay in a crouching position by the roadside in a plight that was pitiable in the extreme, waiting and watching eagerly for some movement in the adjoining forest path.

Hark! a foot-fall!—they are coming!

She rises to her feet agitatedly, every joint in pain, and the fierce throb of fever in her veins, and gazes with starting eyes at the three figures emerging into the clear morning air, and now moving slowly up the highway from her.

"They are going! See, Lovell supports him, and the girl beside him holds his hand! Oh, that he would turn, that I may once more look upon his face! They are now on the hillside, and will have soon disappeared —*Madre de Dios!*—and for ever! Evelyn, look but once upon me—I who have done you so great a wrong, and who have suffered so bitterly for it!" She holds out her arms imploringly in their direction, as she goes out into the road the better to follow their every movement. "He heeds me not! They have reached the hilltop, and Lovell, having bidden them farewell, returns! The sun has touched her hair with gold—they are going! Not one look, no pitying thought for her whose unbounded love was her own undoing! Ah! he turns—yet sees me not! Evelyn—Evelyn—farewell, my love!"

And with the wild cry ringing in the air with a terrible distinctness the two distant figures vanish under the hillside as mysteriously as they have come, and she sinks to the ground in a profound swoon.

CHAPTER XVII.

A REVOLUTION GONE TO PIECES.

It was summer in Luchon, nestled in the heart of the Pyrenees. The sun was shining unimpeded by a single cloud upon this beautiful watering-place, to which not only the aged and the invalid journey for health, but the young and the strong come for the frivolities, flirtations, and perchance the even more fervid liasons of *Les Bagnères.*

The little town sits in a cup of green surrounded by high mountains. The pretty *Pique* River running past it is here joined by the smaller rivulet, the *One.* The valley, of course, is French, but is flanked immediately to the east by that spur of old Catalonia called Lerida, which seems to place Spain and France closer together at this point than at any of the passes which run over the rocky cliffs and through the precipitous gorges of the Pyrenees, giving the contrabandista, the smuggler, and the bandit the chances of fat pickings, devil-may-care existence, and at times even romantic adventure.

Immediately to the south of the little valley is the

Maladetta Mountain, named "the Accursed," from its frightful precipices, barren rocks, and sterile and inhospitable grandeur, the monarch of the Pyrenees. But this is just in Spain, and is hidden from the view of the merry loungers in the pretty *allees* and shaded gardens of alluring Luchon, by nearer peaks and precipices.

This town, nestled between its great mountains and confined between its two little rivers, is this morning as beautiful as it has ever been in its existence, and Luchon has had many lovely days from the time the old Romans knew the virtue of its baths until the present day, when invalids from the world over visit its warm springs to regain lost health.

Though the great bath-house, with its numerous marble columns and pretty architecture, was full this morning, not only of invalids, but of pleasure-seekers, who, affected the waters as almost a matter of recreation, there was no lighter-hearted party than the one gathered about the iron spring some three hundred yards further up the valley. The bright colors in the light dresses of the ladies made brilliant contrast with the fashionable summer costumes of the gentlemen. The bearing of the whole party was that of citizens of the world, people equally at home on the piazza of Shepherd's Hotel, Cairo, the boulevards of Paris, Hyde Park, London, or Broadway, New York.

Still, this morning the faces of all had a vivacity and an excitement that is rather uncommon to the languid denizens of this Continental lounging-place. One of the ladies especially seemed not only to be excited, but nervous, for she was glancing anxiously up the little road that leads down the valley from the Castel Vieil, which caps the mouth of the gorge to the south.

"In the last ten minutes you have looked towards Spain ten times, Lady Severne," remarked the Honourable Cecil Commairs, an English M.P.

"Lord Severne is in Spain, and Marion has only been married two years," interjected this gentleman's wife.

"Ah, and we have been married four, eh, Alice?" laughed her husband. "You, I presume, would gaze towards the north from which the railroad brings many gallants."

"But I," remarked Lady Severne "look towards the south." To this she added nervously: "Wouldn't you gaze towards Spain, Alice, if your husband had insisted upon riding to the Pic d'Entécade to get a good view of the Maladetta, despite your suggestions that this Carlist uprising had unsettled the whole Spanish frontier?"

"Pooh, my dear Lady Severne," remarked little Peregrine Harcourt, of the British Legation, Paris, "it's only a mile or two over the border to the *Pic*, don't you know, and these beastly conspirators will think twice before they stop an English subject, I assure you."

To this Lady Severne did not answer. She had wandered a few steps from the party, and had her field glass once more to her pretty eyes, searching anxiously the little road leading down from the Castel Vieil.

"You don't think there is any danger here?" faltered Alice Commairs nervously. "You know just over those mountains," she points to the East, "not six miles away, is the Vallee d'Aran, that was so fearfully ravaged during the last Carlist war."

"Nonsense!" interjected her husband. "Don't you know the French have a company of trailleurs at the Port de Venasque and a battery of mountain artillery on the ridge over there. Any bloodthirsty followers of Don Carlos crossing this frontier will be immediately disarmed."

"Hush, stop talking about bloodthirsty Carlist bravos, Cecil," whispered his wife. "Don't you know that Marion, since she had that romantic adventure with a portion of Don Carlos' followers in the castle in Cornwall, is rather nervous about the order."

"Yes, rumour had it that young Evelyn had nearly been carried off by the head vixen of the gang, that Doña Rufina, the young widow of old eccentric Lord Diarrogh," returned little Harcourt, who, like many little men, assumed to know everything. "But there wasn't a great deal said about the matter then. Young

Darley was only young Darley, his two cousins hadn't conveniently kicked the bucket, and he wasn't Viscount Severne, by Jove!"

But this is broken in upon by a joyous cry: "My husband! I see him. He is galloping so fast, the guide is left behind. He must see me! Evelyn!" Marion calls hastily, "Evelyn!" and waves her handkerchief to a flying cavalier.

Three minutes after, springing from a reeking steed, a young Englishman had a young English wife in his arms, and careless of company and criticism, was kissing a pair of lips as red as cherries and as eager as a bride's for salute.

His wife's kiss seemed to reward the young gentleman for the hurried and reckless ride he had taken down the mountain path. These two were still lovers. Fortune had been kind to them. Wealth and title had come to them in the two years of their married life, for Evelyn's cousin, Viscount Severne, had died in his bed of old age, and the intermediate cousin had fallen leading his company against the hill tribes in northern India, and the offspring of the Lincolnshire agriculturist had come into the Severne estates and title, and with it the social distinction that always appertains to a grand old English Viscounty—a good old English estate, and a very large balance at one's bankers.

But neither the abstractions of political life nor London gaiety brought to him by this stroke of worldly luck had changed the love of Evelyn Darley for sweet Marion Wilton, and she returned his affection with all that trusting faith which had been scarcely disturbed by the episode in the Cornish castle, and which had been more than entirely renewed when he placed the wedding ring upon her finger in the little church in the pretty hamlet of Copley on the Lincolnshire fens.

The two years of married life have only added to Marion's beauty. The bud has only expanded a little; the graceful lines of her figure are a little fuller; there is a little more soul, if possible, in the sweet blue eyes; as she stands by her husband's side there is no prettier young matron in all Luchon than Marion, Lady Severne.

Her dress, made by some modiste who is so great that he can affect simplicity, only emphasizes it. The light muslins of her robe, the bright sash of ribbon that gives color to it, make her look still a girl.

As his guide, an honest-faced native, rode away with the horses, to him she murmured sweetly, a trace of agitation in her manner: "You—you saw nothing of the war across in Spain?"

"Nothing more savage than a shepherd's dog who resented my intrusion on his flock," returned her husband, "and that, I believe, was in France, as we had not passed the Hospice. In fact, Jacques, who is a wary old guide, refused to accompany me across the

Spanish border. He had seen too much blood-letting over there in '76, he said. But why did you ask, Mabs?"

"You know why, darling," whispered his wife. "Though this is as beautiful as any spot on earth, and our stay here has been in dreamland, still we seem so near to civil war, and I—I can never forget our meeting when we were almost boy and girl, with——"

"Beautiful Doña Rufina," laughed her husband, as he closed her mouth with a kiss.

A moment after Cecil Commairs strolls over to them and remarks: "I suppose, Severne, we might as well step down to the baths. We have been waiting for you for an hour, doing the *jardin Anglais* to kill time. Lady Severne, Alice has been beckoning to you for the last three minutes."

"Very well, I am coming," answered Marion. "We might as well all go to the baths. I suppose you don't care for any more exercise this morning?" She looks archly at her husband.

"Yes, a bath for other than hygienic purposes would be about the right thing for me, I think," smiled Evelyn, brushing off a moiety of the dust that covered his riding suit.

"Wait for me; I am coming, Alice!" cries Marion, and running to her friend, she takes her arm, and whispers: "Now that my husband has returned to me, I can listen to your description of your costume for the fancy dress ball at Pau next week like a senseless, frivolous, everyday woman."

So the ladies tripping together in advance, the whole party ramble down the little path to the Etablissement-Thermal, though one or two of them look longingly at the zig-zag paths running up the hillsides that, shaded by the great beach-trees, look so cool and pleasant this sultry day.

As they walk the three gentlemen go into a little conversation. "Your wife seemed rather anxious for you, old man," remarks the Honourable Cecil.

"Ah, yes, bless her heart," cries her young husband. "Mabs doesn't care for civil war, and——"

"And has rather a horror of Carlists in particular," laughs Harcourt. "By-the-bye, they say that this uprising is a woman's war."

"A woman's war?" ejaculate both his friends.

"Yes, I am told that a chieftainess heads this last rising of the faithful followers of Don Carlos. There's the new woman for you, in her glory. But she hasn't made a first-rate job. Her peasants fight for her and die for her, as if she were the Maid of Orleans—but she started the affair a little prematurely. Went off in a half-cocked, sentimental, emotional, female sort of way, and now the revolution has gone to pieces—except for the butchering—killing—last stand—die in the ditch that these Carlist outbreaks always finish up with," drawls the little diplomatist.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SWEET, INNOCENT LITTLE MERCEDES.

By this time the whole party have entered the *Salle des Pas Perdus*, and are registering their names in the book for bathers.

A moment later they take their ways to their different apartments, though Evelyn, as he strolled to his bath, had a curious look on his countenance. For among the many loungers and lookers-on that make picturesque the Salle des Bains, he has caught sight of a face that brings back to him a memory. A pair of beady jet eyes that flash in an eerie, baneful beauty seem to recall to him the Castle of Tarnworth and his curious adventures in those ancient halls. He has but a fleeting opportunity, and that distantly, to view the small yet clear-cut Andalusian features and the jealous pouting mouth; but as he plunges into the sulphur water, he mutters to himself: "Could that have been Doña Mercedes del Monte?"

Immediately after his ablutions this thought was once more impressed upon him. As he and his wife strolled out of the *Etablissement-Thermal*, lingering under the marble columns of the portico to pass the words of the morning with languid acquaintances, they were joined by a French gentleman, Monsieur Rafael Simon, a leading operator on the Paris Bourse, who was very happy to claim friendship with the English Viscount and his beautiful wife.

"You rode up towards the Spanish frontier to-day, Lord Severne," he said, after greeting them. "Did you see anything of the insurrection?"

"As much as I wanted to of it," replied tthe young Englishman.

"And what was that?"

"A company of French troops guarding the pass, a mountain battery loaded and ready for action."

"Which is enough to make me wish to leave here," interjected Marion, with a little piquant shudder. To this she added, half pleadingly, "Besides, we positively must spend a few days in Paris. I have a dressmaker to whom I must give a little time before returning to London."

"Ah, in that case, Lord Severne," said the French stock operator, "your visit to Paris will be an expensive one;" then he goes half laughingly on: "I can give you a hint so as to make a few thousand francs which your lady can spend in new dresses. Buy Spanish bonds."

"What, with this Carlist outbreak?"

"The Carlist outbreak is only a little *emeute;* just to influence the Cortes to appoint the right man prime minister. It is the uprising of a wild woman, and they say only one district answered her call. They are already practically suppressed. It only took a couple of regiments of infantry to do it."

The Frenchman leads Evelyn a little to one side, which is easy, as Lady Severne is in conversation now with Mrs. Commairs and one or two other compatriots, and whispers to him: "According to my information, which I know is accurate, this uprising is a bubble. This little revolution has already gone to pieces. Spanish securities, which are very low, *must* react. Telegraph your brokers to buy a moderate amount to-day, and sell—say three days from now, and my lady can be extravagant without costing you anything."

"You are sure of this?" asked Evelyn, who, like most Englishmen, is not above turning an honest penny.

"Certainly! I got it this very day first hand from Señor Diego Suarez, a hanger-on of the Carlist party. In fact, I imagine he is one of the spies they have even now about this portion of the country."

"Suarez?" whispered Evelyn.

"Yes, an artist, I believe, by profession; married to a pretty little Spanish girl named Mercedes; a fellow of no worth in the world, who has been connected with half a hundred shady transactions, but one who, I am sure, dare not deceive me. To tell the truth, I imagine even now he is playing for both parties in this matter, the Spanish Government and Don Carlos at the same time. But my information about Spanish bonds I think we may be sure of."

"Thank you," replied Evelyn, "I will consider the matter," and turned to his wife, a little shadow of concern upon his face. He knows now the beady eyes and piquant jealous Spanish features he saw in the Salle des Bains were those of Doña Mercedes del Monte. "Who has now become," he chuckles to himself, "the wife of my rival in the affections of Doña Rufina."

Still, the presence of these two Spanish adventurers makes him anxious to take his wife from Luchon. He knows that any encounter with these people, or any memory of the eventful days they passed as semi-prisoners in Tarnworth Castle, even now agitates his pretty spouse.

So after they have sauntered under the shade of the luxuriant lime trees to the Hotel de Londres, he is rather pleased to find awaiting him a blue telegram from his solicitor, which requests his immediate presence in London on some rather important private business.

Here is his excuse for hurried departure without telling Marion the real reason, and the husband remarks to his wife in the seclusion of their salon: "Mabs, supposing we go into the great world again. Two days will place us in Paris, where you can get a lot of new dresses, though I must confess you don't seem to be very badly robed even now." He looks admiringly upon the dainty figure of Lady Severne, who is gowned in some pretty little creation of Pingat, which makes her beauty ethereal.

"You wish to leave here?" says his wife eagerly. "So do I. Evelyn, ever since we have heard of these Carlists I have been anxious to get away from the Spanish border."

"Very well, my dear; then we will do so at once, and do it in a very pretty manner. By this afternoon's train I will send down Estelle and Jackson. They will have rooms prepared for us at the Hotel de France, St. Gaudens; I know the proprietor. An old-fashioned inn, but he will make everything very comfortable for us this evening. Then we will drive down the valley of the Pique together, Spanish mules and outriders and tête-à-tête, a little souvenir of our honeymoon which we passed so joyously together in the Tyrol. The mountains will be the same, the boy and girl the same——"

"The love the same!" cries his wife, throwing herself into his arms, and kissing him in a way that tells him her lips are as true as her words.

"Very well, my dear. While you order lunch I'll make our preparations," remarks Evelyn, and lighting a cigar, he goes out and gives orders for a private equipage to take him and his wife to St. Gaudens; tells his man to pack his trunks, and his wife's maid to get her mistress's impedimenta together and take them on this afternoon's train to St. Gaudens. "There make arrangement for me, Jackson," he says to his valet, "at the Hotel de France. Prevost, the *maitre d'hotel*, will remember me."

These directions being given, he strolled in to a tête-à-tête luncheon with his wife, where he said: "Mabs, as soon as the heat of the day has gone we start, dear. You had better get into your travelling dress at once. We will leave not later than four o'clock," and thought that he had arranged for himself a very pleasant afternoon.

But the departure of a great English "milord" from a French watering-place is not made secretly. The preparation of a lumbering old coach, with its four Spanish mules and their jingling bells, is a matter of "much ado" at the stables. Mr. Jackson, my lord's valet, walks about giving his directions to Boots and Porter. Mademoiselle Estelle, my lady's maid, has to bid adieu to a number of other ladies' maids, with many kisses and much gossip.

So this news chances to come to a half-Italian gentleman by the name of Suarez and his wife Mercedes, *née* del Monte, who are occupying a small and very modest apartment just under the eaves of the same

"They are going, these grand English people, who are now so luxurious and so happy," said Mercedes, between the whiffs of a cigarette smoked with Spanish grace. "You have heard them order their coach and four; these people, Diego, who have brought to us our great unhappiness."

"Yes," snarled her husband, "they who prevented me from wedding the beautiful Doña Rufina, and you from marrying the opulent and aristocratic Don Domingo, and forced us to a most uncongenial union, my unpleasant little spouse."

"*Pha*, you once thought me beautiful," rejoined Mercedes, tapping angrily one little foot in its piquant red slipper upon the floor. "During our honeymoon you painted me for a Madonna."

"*Sapristi*, that was before I had spent all your wedding dower, *mi querida!*"

"*Diablo*, you mean that was before I had made you jealous," laughed his wife, and puffed a blue wreath from between her coral yet cruel lips.

"Ah, *caramba*, but we have made things warm for one another," purred his sweet little lady, jeeringly. "Now let us make it warm for these people whom I hate, and have cause to whenever I look upon you."

"Across the border they might not be so comfortable," sneered Suarez, meditatively, perchance anxious to take vindictive Mercedes' attention from himself."

"Yes, in the hands of the contrabandists, amid the smoke of burning villages and the shots from Mauser rifles, they would not be so very happy," laughed the girl; then her tone became serious and savage. "I—you know I am such a born conspirator, Diego—I think I can arrange this matter as we have arranged all our other matters, so that whatever happens we are on the right side of the hedge. As it is now whether Don Carlos succeeds or the government of Don Alfonso remains in power, we have our bread not only buttered, but sufficient garlic to flavor it with. I have—but perhaps you had better do this matter—to give a hint to old Pepé Tomas, who will ride as postilion, that my lady carries with her her big, sparkling diamonds, and that my lord's ransom will be a large one, and Pepé will forget that he is now an honest postilion and only remember that he was once the most famous bandit in the Pyrenees. He will immediately go back to his old tricks, and my lord and my lady may not have so pleasant a jaunt this afternoon as they expect."

"Spoken like my own darling wife," replied her husband. "Though you have forgotten one thing: that we should tell Pepé that there is honour among thieves, and that if the diamonds and ransom are large, we should have our moiety of it."

"Yes, my dear, you never forget anything," replied his spouse, as she tossed her pretty little head about, and waved her Castilian curls in the air. "You are so brilliant, I think I will kiss you, Diego."

"You will not bite me?" muttered her lord and master, warily.

"*Por Dios*, I will only kiss you—this time."

"Then, *cara esposa*, I will permit you the luxury."

"*Diablo*, is that an insult? Have I not warned you that if you dare to insinuate that I like your kisses better than you like mine, my jealous heart will some day compel me to—but I'll not threaten. It's surer not to talk but to stab," continues the lady, philosophically. "You know I have a little way with me, and that it is not England now where I would be tried and perchance hung by the neck; but in the wild Pyrenees, where an assassination or two during a Carlist outbreak will not be thought of much. That is what will make us safe, if anything happens to the English lord and lady. Now, don't forget to tell old Pepé Tomas about the diamonds, *mi adorato*. Remind him of the days of yore, when a man's life wasn't worth more than a sequin in these passes. Bring back to him the glorious past, and Pepé will do our work for us with good cheer, an honest heart, and many prayers to the Virgin. *Adios, caballero*." And the lady sent her husband away upon an errand that was not exactly Puritanical, but one that he did with the subtle art of an Italian conspirator who had been born of a Carbonari mother and an Andalusian father.

CHAPTER XIX.

PEPÉ TOMAS REMEMBERS HE WAS ONCE A BANDIT.

Thus it happened that about four o'clock in the afternoon, with much jingling of silver bells, stamping of mules and cracking of whip, and many wavings of handkerchiefs from assembled guests, Evelyn, Lord Severne, and his beautiful wife, thinking that they were going to an outing as happy as a honeymoon, drove down the long green lime-shaded Allee d'Epigny, and crossing the *One*, with beautiful Luchon behind them, proceeded down the valley of the Pique towards the sun-dried plains of Languedoc.

"Isn't this romantic?" remarked the beautiful girl in the retirement of the large Spanish coach, cushioned in Cordova leather, and swung on heavy old-fashioned springs that vibrated at each rut in the road.

"Oh, yes, and decidedly ancient," suggested his lordship. "About as old as the times of the Cid and the Pass of Roncesvalles."

"Yes, our postilion looks old enough to have fought the Moors," laughed the lady, as she gazed upon the heavy spurred individual, who, mounted upon one of the mules and guiding the other three, was rattling them down the valley.

Old Pepé Tomas was worthy of her admiration from a picturesque point of view, if from no other. This ancient gentleman of the Spanish border, originally contrabandista, had graduated into a bandit; but, reforming as the world became more modern, had changed into a postilion in his old age. He had one of those honest faces that are often seen at their best in the Pyrenees, that dogged open look which says: "At times I use the knife and am not ashamed of it, for I do it after the manner of my father before me." That same expression that in Corsica makes a vendetta not only humane, but noble; that same cast of countenance which in the American Indian says: "Torturing enemies is the right of man; scalping opponents is the honour of a warrior;" not a pleasant expression to see to outsiders in general, but still one that makes many ruffians' consciences easy and their minds at times almost clerical.

But the gentle English lady does not appreciate this. To her Pepé has an honest face. So has a bulldog. The romantic appearance of the weazened old fellow appealed to Lady Severne as the ancient postilion with a bright *sarapé* over his shoulders, and high Spanish boots adorned with heavy long roweled spurs, and a bright red necktie bound about his swarthy, sinewy, yet attenuated neck, turned about in his high peaked saddle and brought his deep eyes to bear upon her and smiled gently at the beauty of the lady under his charge, a lady about whom he has some curious thoughts as he looks at the little travelling satchel swung over her graceful shoulder and dangling against her travelling costume of light blue baptiste cloth. Pepé's eyes, however, light up with a little greater animation and more subtle fire as they catch sight of the athletic young Englishman, who in white flannels and straw hat, is making himself very comfortable this day beside his beautiful wife.

So they go rumbling, rather slowly at times, down the valley, and everything seems well with them until about five o'clock Marion suddenly cries: "We have stopped!"

And her husband, putting his head out of the carriage window, shouts: "Postilion, what is the matter?"

"Oh, nothing, *caballero*," replies Pepé, who is examining one of the hoofs of his leading mule. "Only this animal has cast a shoe and gone lame. I'll walk my team gently down the road. There is a smithy nearby, some half hour ahead of us if we walk quickly, where a new iron can be put upon the heel of this animal, and all will be well once more."

"Will it delay us very much?" asks Lady Severne, a little anxiety in her tone.

"No, Doña, it will delay but little. What matters it whether we arrive at St. Gaudens at eight o'clock or at nine o'clock. That is little. The bed will still be there; the supper will still be waiting for you, and for me. Besides, my motto is 'trust in the Virgin.' She will never desert one who believes in her," and the muleteer clucks to his team, and they slowly go down the valley again.

But arriving at the smithy, the smith insists upon shoeing all the mules. It is his chance of a great job, and he is not going to miss it, and in his honest Pyrenees fashion, this worthy proceeds to make hay while the sun shines.

So it is all of an hour before they leave the blacksmith, who insists upon payment before he permits them to depart, though he bows to the earth as he finds his hands full of silver five-franc pieces the Englishman has placed in them.

Then they go lumbering on again, but it is nearly dark now, and the rocks, the cliffs, and the beach-trees and the firs on the higher mountains throw long shadows which gradually become no shadows, for darkness is upon them.

But the road seems good enough for a mountain one and Evelyn, finding his wife drowsy from the heat of the day, permits her to sink comfortably to rest, laying her fair head trustingly on his shoulder.

So they rumble on. Then he goes to sleep, and still they rumble on; even if he knew the road he would probably not discover that they had left the direct one to St. Gaudens, but had turned to the east, and passing by St. Béat, have turned up the little river Aran that runs down from the Spanish valley, and from going north were now going to the south.

But about twelve o'clock in the night, for the road is now becoming very rocky and rutty, and from a well travelled one is degenerating into almost a mountain path, Evelyn wakes up and says to his wife: "Mabs, we must be getting near to St. Gaudens now."

"What makes you think that?" she whispers, sleepily.

"My stomach; I am very hungry. I wonder what time it is?" Pulling out his match-box, he strikes a light, looks at his watch, and ejaculates: "Great thunder!"

"What's the matter, dear?"

"Why, it's twelve o'clock, and we are not at St. Gaudens." Putting his head out of the carriage window the Englishman sees nothing. Darkness is about him as they lumber on, though he can hear the ripple of a stream, which is apparently a torrent rushing over boulders.

"Ahoy there, Pepé!" he cries, for he has learnt the postilion's name.

"Ay, Señor," comes the answer in the darkness.

"How far are we from St. Gaudens?"

"About ten miles yet, your honor."

"We must have travelled very slowly."

"The smith made a very bad job of the shoeing. Another mule has cast an iron. I thought it best not to tell you as it might add to your impatience, Señor. Trust to Pepé, and you will be in St. Gaudens within three hours."

"Not till three o'clock, Evelyn," ejaculates a pretty voice in the darkness. "Three o'clock, and I am so hungry."

"Never mind, we will sleep it off, darling." And the husband, in trying to compose his wife, grows quiet himself, and goes to sleep again, as the carriage goes rumbling on.

But in two hours and a half more the Englishman wakes again, for the wheel has struck a terrible rut, and thrown him forward, and the vehicle is now apparently climbing up a precipice judging by the angle of the carriage and the cries of the muleteer. On this Evelyn shouts: "We should be in a level country; what kind of a road is it?"

"A side track, *caballero,* that cuts off the distance. We will be at our destination in an hour more at the latest."

But the Englishman's appetite keeps him from sleeping further, and he consoles himself with a cigar, and is rather astonished to discover that the road grows worse instead of better, if possible.

Then the carriage suddenly comes to a stop. He puts his head out of the window and shouts into the darkness: "What is the matter now?"

"A trace broken, *caballero*. Trust in the Virgin."

"I'll never forgive the landlord of the hotel for giving me such a rig to travel in," mutters the outraged tourist.

Then he leans back and hears apparently something done with the mules; probably Pepé is repairing the damage. A few moments after, catching some rapid movement of animals, the Englishman puts his head out of the coach window, calls again, and gets no answer.

"Where the dickens are you?" he cries.

To this there was no reply.

A moment after, not alarmed, but somewhat mystified, the young Englishman springs out of the carriage. As far as he can tell in the darkness by groping about the vehicle is in a little mountain path. The deep shades that come over him show he is in a gorge. The wild rush of a stream that comes down in little waterfalls, its waters white even in the gloom, tells him that it is a mountain torrent. He puts his hand into the cold water to get a drink; then starts and mutters: "Curious, all the rivers flow towards the plains and St. Gaudens. By the way we have been travelling, and the run of this stream, we have been going up the mountains, not down them. Has our postilion made himself drunk with *aguardiente* while we have been asleep?"

But here a little voice calls him: "Evelyn!"

He goes to his wife and she says to him: "Are we not yet at St. Gaudens?"

"No, my dear."

"Where are we?"

"Hanged if I know."

"Where is Pepé?"

"He has probably gone for assistance," answers Evelyn.

"Oh, my, we are alone in this wild place."

"Yes, my darling, but that does not matter; I am with you," says the Englishman, cheerily, though just the same he wishes he were an American, one of that kind of travelling individuals who always carry a heavy six-shooting Colt's revolver.

This conversation is interrupted by a hoarse challenge which rolls up the ravine: "Halt! Who goes there? Answer, or we fire!" To the astonishment of the Englishman, it is in Spanish.

"Hold! We are English travellers belated in the road," cries Evelyn. "Whoever you are, don't shoot, for God's sake! My wife is here!"

"That's a likely story, Señor," says an honest, hearty voice, as the young man and his astonished wife find themselves surrounded by a patrol of sturdy peasants, whose repeating rifles show they are armed for regular combat. They are headed by a young lieutenant, who sternly orders: "Surrender! Make one move, and you die!" Then advancing to them with a cocked revolver and drawn sabre in his hand, he demands: "Your name and business here, Señor?"

"I am Lord Severne, an English nobleman. This lady is my wife," replies Evelyn, in angry tones. "We have had an accident to our travelling carriage. Dare to molest us, and I shall report you to the mayor of the arrondisment, and demand your punishment from the French Government."

"The French Government," laughs the young officer. "You are past the Spanish border by two good leagues."

"Past the Spanish border? Impossible! I was driving to St. Gaudens from Luchon."

"You are now in the very heart of the Tentenade Montes, bordering on the Val d'Aran. How you passed the Pont du Roi without being stopped by the French guard on the frontier exceeds the comprehension of a Spanish gentleman. Valdez," he speaks to a villager who apparently acts as sergeant, "keep good watch on this gentleman till he explains this very extraordinary story."

A clicking of gun locks startles Marion; she cries nervously from the carriage: "But it is true, sir. We went to sleep in the coach and found ourselves here."

"And then that infernal Pepé, the postilion, took away the mules. He has probably gone for assistance," breaks in Evelyn.

"Let me see your passports."

"By what right do you demand them? Who are you?"

"Soldiers of Don Carlos, patrolling these mountains under orders to arrest spies. Your passports, if you have them, Señor."

"Certainly," replies the Englishman, philosophically. He produces his documents, and lights a few matches from his box, their uncertain illumination assisting the Spanish officer to make hasty examination.

"These seem to be correct, Señor, as well as I can judge," says the Lieutenant. "Now, permit me to ask your story."

Thus requested, Lord Severne tells him his tale, which is punctuated once or twice by the soft voice of his wife giving additional details.

As the Englishman closes, the Carlist lieutenant breaks in: "You say Pepé the muleteer has played this trick upon you. You mean Pepé Tomas?"

"Yes, that's his name," cries Marion, eagerly.

"Pepé the muleteer; Pepé Tomas," ejaculates the Spaniard. "*Dios,* that's how you passed the Pont du Roi. The scoundrel knows every bypath in the mountains. *Caspita,* he has gone back to his old trade, that is all. Pepé was a bandit when I was a child. I have heard my mother tell of him, the cruelest cut-throat in the Pyrenees."

"Oh, Evelyn, if these gentlemen hadn't come to save us," falters Lady Severne.

"Pepé has gone for assistance you say, my lord *Inglès*," laughs the Carlist lieutenant. "Yes, assistance to cut your throats."

And as if in proof of the Spaniard's suggestion, this conversation is interrupted by the noise of people in the darkness coming down the mountain.

"*Santa Maria!* " mutters the Spanish officer, "these fellows would doubtless put their crimes on the soldiers of our holy cause. If it is as I guess I will teach them a lesson."

With that he gives some whispered directions to his men, who silently and cautiously disappear in the gloom.

"Lift your wife out of the carriage," he whispers to Evelyn. "Now call to Pepé, and see if I have not told you true."

Thus urged, Evelyn shouts: "Is that you, Pepé, bringing assistance? "

"Here I am, honored Señor, with a lot of honest fellows, *gracias á Dios*," is the cheerful answer up the cliff.

Apparently the muleteer has found someone to aid them, for now Lord and Lady Severne hear several muttered *carambas* and other Spanish expletives, some of them of such strength that Marion puts her hands to her pretty ears. These indicate that some of Pepé's friends have stumbled in the rocky trail in the darkness.

"Now pick up your wife," whispers the Spaniard under his breath, "and carry her across the stream, I'll show you the way; then place her carefully behind a boulder. We will see whether these gentlemen are honest men or not."

Following the directions of the lieutenant, who seems to be a youth of quick judgment and rapid action, Evelyn lifts up the dainty form of his wife in his strong arms and cautiously wades across a little mountain torrent guided by the lieutenant, who has given his name as Don Orfelo Pachaco.

A moment later the English lady is placed in safety behind a huge rock, her husband seating himself beside her.

Some minute or two after this they hear voices from probably half a dozen men gathered about the coach.

"Where are they, these *ricos?*" cries one.

"*Caramba!*" This is in Pepé's voice. "Our birds were here a moment ago. Have they taken a hint and fled? They can't have flown far. They will never get out of our clutches now."

Then they hear him shout: "*Inglès,* me lord, if you don't come to me at once, I'll grope for you in the darkness and cut your throat. *Cruz de Cristo!* I know you are not armed." Receiving no answer to this he shouts: "*Inglès* me lady, if you come not here from your concealment, I'll put a stiletto between your delicate shoulders. But if you are gentle and obedient, my little lamb, I'll only take your diamonds and your money, not your life. *Aqui* at once! Pepé Tomas, the bandit of the Pyrenees, calls to you!"

"Fire!" cries the lieutenant, and a rattling volley poured from surrounding rocks tears up the ravine about the bravos. If ever bandits receive surprise and justice at the same moment Pepé and his cutthroats get it now. Another volley from repeating rifles breaks the stillness of the night, mingled with curses, groans, and shrieks. Those of them not dead or wounded fly screaming up the mountain path pursued by dropping shots. Then all is silence.

"Shall we cross the stream and finish them up, lieutenant?" asks Sergeant Valdez, eagerly.

"No, we might lose men from the knives of the wounded bravos in the darkness. We have time to do no more. This volley may bring upon us some of the troops of the tyrant, who are also patrolling these mountains."

"Now, *caballero*," the young officer speaks hastily to Evelyn, "you and your lady must come with me to headquarters. It would be your only safety in any event, and my orders are to take everyone found in this district to headquarters. There are so many Alfonsist spies about, my orders are to take every one to 'Our Lady'."

The reverent way in which the officer speaks the title makes the Englishman ask, curiously: "'Our Lady,' who is she?"

"That is her secret. You will stand face to face with her within the hour. My men will assist you and Lady Severne up the path. Please carry your wife again across the boulders of the stream, my lord. Move quickly, men! Our firing may bring down a company or two of the Regiment of Tarragona, those bloodhounds of the usurper, upon us."

CHAPTER XX.

THE PASS IN THE PYRENEES.

The grey light of morning had been coming over the mountains for a little time. In an hour the sun would rise over the great peaks and give brightness and brilliancy to the foliage of the firs that top the higher ranges and softer green to the beach trees and limes and ilex that shade the lower valleys.

By the side of a little cabin perched on a crag of one of the mountains flanking the pass leading to the Port d'Aula, beyond which dizzy defile is the French frontier, a party of Carlist officers, 'mid the light of an expiring camp-fire, are talking in the low tones of men to whom this day must bring a life and death crisis. For they are at their last stronghold, and though their men, undisciplined yet brave, will fight from crag to crag, from precipice to precipice, the forces gathering against them from Venasque on the west and Urgel on the south, three strong regiments of Spanish infantry of the line, and a light mountain battery of rapid-fire guns, are strong enough to crush the few hundred who still uphold the Carlist banner

It has been a wild outbreak, a hasty uprising. It has been crushed very rapidly, very cruelly. No prisoners have been taken. It has been like nearly all Spanish wars, *guerra à cuchillo;* for the Iberian is no more merciful to a defeated brother than he is to the fallen of any other nation. What vanquished Spanish officer has ever had mercy from a Spanish court-martial, no matter his gallantry, no matter his devotion, no matter the circumstances under which victory has turned her fickle back upon him. The cruelty of the bull-fight is the index of the Spanish nature when aroused. Generally suave, pleasant, punctilious, often the soul of honor, the Spaniard, when he draws his sword, becomes a matador. No mercy for *el toro* is his cry in the arena; no mercy for the rebel, is his shout upon the battle-field.

"*Por Dios,* Señors, it is the last of us to-day or the last of them," remarked a swarthy, but dignified gentleman, wearing the costume of a colonel in the Carlist service, "eh, Don Urbano?"

"If the others had but risen," muttered the younger man, "then to-day's sun would see a different sight. But as it is my sword, my life, my all but my honor, belongs to my king, and she who represents him so nobly, so bravely; a man's soul in the body of a beautiful woman, and yet a woman's heart."

"No woman's heart when it comes to cold steel, Señor," returned the elder officer. "I know my sister too well to guess that she ever cares more for the life of an enemy than for her own; which she values as nothing—nothing since that awful time love nearly made her forget our cause but now has brought her back to it. You remember the Cornish castle, my young Urbano?" he whispers, moodily.

"*Cierto,* she fights to forget her passion," laughs the addressed, who wears a captain's shoulder knots upon his blouse. "And here's her orderly."

The silent figure of the dumb Breconridge strides up the path and saluting, presents a scrap of paper to Don Domingo.

"Rufina orders me to receive the reports of all scouting parties," remarks that officer, glancing at the message by the flickering brands of the half-dead fire.

"*Santos*, our lady sleeps on the picket line again. Always at it, day and night," interjects Don Urbano, as Breconridge disappears down the trail on his return to his mistress at the front.

"This duty won't trouble me long," observes the Colonel. "The patrols are all in, I think."

"All but one; that headed by Lieutenant Pachaco. It ranges furthest to the west. But he is coming now," says Urbano; for the young man hears the hoarse voice of the sentry challenging and the countersign and word of the night given.

"With your permission, my colonel, I think I will take a cat-nap or two before the morning brings the battle on us," adds Don Urbano, and saluting, strolls away, and wrapping himself up in his poncho, lies down by a neighbouring camp-fire and goes into slumber within the moment, for a good partisan soldier sleeps like a good watch-dog, as opportunity comes to him.

"I will join you, my sleepy Urbano, as soon as I receive the report of the patrol," grins the senior officer.

A moment later Lieutenant Pachaco salutes and stands before him, Lord Severne resting just out of earshot behind him. In the gloom, as the young officer is about to make his report, the colonel suddenly utters an exclamation of joy. "I cannot see very well in the darkness," he remarks, "but you have captured a spy, my worthy lieutenant. After this man has answered my questions you will shoot him and throw him off the cliff."

"No spy, Colonel; an unfortunate English traveller, who with his wife, was left helpless in a mountain path by the side of his carriage, from which the mules had been run off by some bandits, who returned to rob them."

"Bandits? *Pha!* they were exterminated long ago. But a few have sprung up on account of this uprising. Their deeds of blood the world will attribute to us. I hope you exterminated the scoundrels, Lieutenant."

"It was impossible to pursue them in the darkness.

We killed a few; the rest escaped in the gloom. The day was coming on. I dared not be away from Our Lady's banner when every man will be needed."

"Quite right, Lieutenant. You say the man is English. Bring him here. Where is his wife?"

"She is resting by a campfire a little further down the trail. Her beauty was so delicate and her fatigue so great, I thought it best she should have all the care we could give her."

"That is well. You say she is beautiful; some English women are," murmured the colonel, and the flickering flames of the dull camp-fire seemed to give his eyes a faraway look. "Direct the Englishman to come to me," he said sharply, as if to drive away remembrance; for this conversation has been apart from Evelyn, who still has remained some few steps in the background, a couple of Carlist soldiers standing beside him.

"You may retire, Lieutenant Pachaco. Any orders in regard to this lady or gentleman I shall give to the officer of the day."

"*Gracias*, Señor, I shall have a few winks before death," remarks the younger man, and goes down the trail to join his company.

Consequently within the next thirty seconds the Carlist colonel finds himself confronted by the Englishman, and asking him, a slight tone of suspicion in his voice, how he came into the Spanish mountains during such troublous times.

As young Darley speaks, the other suddenly utters an exclamation of surprise, picks a flaming brand from the embers of the fire, holds it up, and the two, gazing in each other's eyes, whisper at the same moment:

"Don Domingo!"

"Evelyn Darley!"

The Spaniard says: "Señor, I grieve to inform you, you are here at an inopportune time. Permit me to think a moment," and takes a few strides up the little pathway in deep and excited meditation.

"He is here to bring back 'Our Lady's' agony to her," Don Domingo mutters, in gloomy agitation; "to add the last stroke to the ruin that is now upon us. At sight of his accursed face, her passion will come to Rufina again. Even in this crisis of our cause the dead love will become alive once more; 'Our Lady,' upon whom the men look as if she had victory in her hand, will become once more a lovesick maid. The sword she has wielded like a man will fall from her woman's hand. Our soldiers, missing their Maid of Saragossa, will become a panic-stricken flock of sheep for the shambles of our tyrant's soldiers. And then his wife; the lieutenant said she was beautiful as a dream of love. Doubtless more lovely than ever. Few of us will survive this day. Why should not I have two or three hours of happiness with this captive God has given unto me ere I die." Passion surges in his veins. He remembers the beauty of Marion Wilton, and murmurs: "*Santa Maria!* I only do this as a military necessity."

Striding down the path, Don Domingo speaks hastily to a soldier, asking: "Who is the officer of the day?"

"Don Fabricio del Monte," is the reply.

"Ah, God is helping me," thinks Don Domingo. "This Englishman's scar is still upon the forehead of Fabricio. It has disfigured him for ever." Then he orders hastily: "Send the captain to me!" And turning, strides to his English captive, and says: "You will pardon me, Señor, but I have examined your passports; they are not good."

"They are perfectly good in France, and describe me as Lord Severne."

"Your name is Evelyn Darley."

"I have come into the title lately."

"A likely story. Likewise a likely tale of being in your sleep transported across the French frontier. How could that be without examination, when they have troops at every pass that leads from France to Spain. You are here for no good purpose."

"You know that is not true," cries Evelyn, sharply. "Don Domingo, it is because you hate me."

"I do not hate you."

But Don Fabricio and the guard are now standing by the two men.

"I have no further word for a spy," remarks the colonel.

"You know that is a lie."

"I have not time to discuss the affair. Don Fabricio!" he whispers two or three words to the officer whose forehead is still marked with a deep gash of the old sabre given him in the halls of the Cornish castle. "This man is a spy. As such take him to the bottom of the cliff and shoot him to death. We have no time for court-martials. The bugles will be sounding in half an hour the assembly. The Spanish troops are already probably moving from the Hospice de Paillas, across the valley."

"You wish me killed? You order my death?" gasps Darley, in astounded tones.

"I do!"

"God of Heaven, my wife! For this infamy you shall answer to the English Government."

"*Pha*, in an hour or two I shall answer to Heaven."

"It is because you hate me!"

"No, Señor."

"It is because your sister loves me!"

"No, Señor."

"It is because you love my wife!"

"Ah, you read the riddle at last, *mi amigo*," whispers the Carlist colonel; then orders hoarsely: "Take him away! Ten minutes for his prayers, and then *pasado por las armas!*"

"My God! My wife!" shudders the Englishman, whose face has grown, at this sudden death sentence, pale as the ashes of the fate before him, and is dragged away.

Then, looking after Evelyn, as he is hurried down the path half dazed, the Spaniard's face is suddenly stricken with pallor, and he whispers to himself: "*Diablo!* If Rufina ever knows!" But throwing away conscience, he laughs: "We die in a few hours, yet first one taste of Heaven ere I go to purgatory for my sins," and commands the sergeant: "Take four files and conduct the woman spy to the cabin up the little gorge some fifty yards. There you will confine her until further orders which must all come from me!"

His eyes blaze with the fires of Satan. He mutters: "Marion! This is no straight-laced England and rigid English law. In the pass of the Pyrenees there is no law save that of might, and for an hour or two I, the rejected Domingo, am your master."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FIGHT BY THE MOUNTAIN RIVER.

Now this view of the matter seemed also to have entered the head of Don Fabricio as he looked at the prisoner's pale but handsome face while the guards half lead, half dragged the Englishman down the rocky path, one or two more brutal than the rest urging him with the butts of their guns.

The Spanish captain passes his hand over the scar upon his forehead; he hates the man who bestowed it, still he cannot help thinking something very unpleasant may happen when the despot of the band learns that her lover has been done to death by him. "What will she of the mighty passions do to me if I execute the orders of Don Domingo," he falters to himself.

To Darley's imploring voice begging: "By the love of God, five minutes with my wife—just five minutes for farewell!" Fabricio replied sharply: "You heard my orders," but still lingered in their execution.

At the little cabin used as a guard-house, he delays while selecting the men to do the shooting, and perchance is glad; for here excuse is given him to postpone entirely the commands of the bloodthirsty Domingo.

Young Lieutenant Pachaco, who is now arising from a cat-nap and about to join his company at the front, hears Evelyn's voice again protesting against the murder to be done. The young Carlist having kindly feeling for his captive, cries: "Courage, Englishman!" and stepping up to Don Fabricio, speaks these words, "Permit me, Señor *Capitan,* to call attention to 'Our Lady's' order that no more executions take place without her sanction."

"Ah, you are a friend of this prisoner, Orfélo," replied Fabricio. "You do this to save his life."

"No; to save yours, Señor *Capitan.* You know sudden death comes to all who disobey the orders of 'Our Lady.'"

"*Dios!* You are right. I remember. I shall not execute, I shall merely confine this spy here in this cabin, and then when the soldiers of the usurper have driven us from here, as they probably will do, they will shoot him down without words, for they give no quarter."

With this Fabricio passed his hand over his scarred forehead once more, smiled grimly upon his victim, and ordered him imprisoned in the little hut until the end of the engagement, which is now heralded by the distant report of both Carlist and Government skirmishers as they take pot shots at each other from each tree and boulder behind which they are concealed.

Thus it transpires that while Evelyn Darley is imprisoned in the little building further down the main valley, his wife, who knows nothing of her husband's fate, is hurried up the rocky trail, and as Don Domingo ordered, confined in a rude cabin in the ravine through which the mountain stream rushes down, eager to join the river below.

Despite his struggles, Darley finds the shepherd's cot, from which its occupant, with his sheep and dogs, has fled to higher ranges to avoid the ravages of war, too strong to permit his escape. The stout stone walls of the rough tenement built to defy the mountain storm resist his efforts to penetrate them, and the strong door of tough Pyrenees oak, secured by padlock on the outside, defies his strength to move it; the roof, though only straw-thatched, is far too high for him to reach it, for the place is bare even of table and chairs, which have been torn up to make a campfire.

So racked by the lesser anxiety for himself and the greater one for the wife of his love, Viscount Severne rests in gloomy silence until the sun, rising over the mountain tops, illuminates the valley beneath him. Then the sounds of the battle, which seem to be growing nearer, arouse the young man to look out upon a scene that would be lovely were it not made horrible by barbarous war and bloody combat.

The little building is perched upon a mountain spur overlooking the vale of the Noguera river; therefore a narrow opening in its wall for light and air, the place having no windows, gives him view of the valley below. Some three miles to the west is the little Hospice de Paillas, its white walls glistening in the gleaming sun which is rising above the range at the back of the cabin in which Evelyn is imprisoned. Between him and the Hospice flows the mountain river upon its way to the soft waters of the Mediterranean. The valley, very narrow here and very rocky, as it is among the peaks of the Pyrenees, has but little vegetation. By the running waters, a few firs and pines dot the greensward, upon which the shepherd used to graze his flocks. On both sides of the cañon rise the rough mountains, steep, precipitous, naked. These are occupied by the Carlist band, less than five hundred now of the two thousand who had lived and cheered for their " Lady " but a week ago.

The strongest portion of them is upon the side where Evelyn is imprisoned, for this must be defended to the last. If defeated, it is their one way to retreat; and that only to a safety that means their end as revolutionists. For this road leads to the Port d'Aula, behind which is the frontier of France, across which, should they be driven, these Carlists must throw down their arms and become no longer soldiers, merely exiles.

The young man, understanding pretty well the situation from the remarks of some of the guards, looks out upon this prospect with eager anxiety. Carrying, as most Englishmen do, a strong field-glass, of which, in the hurry of his arrest, he has not been deprived, Evelyn places its strong lenses to his eyes.

It brings very close to him a sight impressive, grand, majestic; that of a band of patriots who, believing their cause is just, are preparing to die for it. Their Basque and Catalonian natures, simple, devout, yet superstitious, only ask that when they groan out their lives their spirits shall go to God; therefore these peasant warriors demand of their priests the consolations of their Church before their souls leave their bodies.

So as they lie singly and in groups behind the rocks and trees scourged by the fire of the advancing Spanish infantry, the priests pass among them, braving the bullets, and Evelyn can see the men telling their beads and saying their prayers, even as they take the lives of their enemies. Likewise, he notices sometimes a barefooted friar falling dead or wounded, as he gives the absolution of the Church to these mountaineers who fight the harder as they say their *Pater Nosters.*

In this line of skirmishers one figure catches the eye of the young man, and brings with it memories of the castle in Cornwall. A woman's form, despite almost the garments of a man, graceful as a mountain sylph. For the upper part of the figure, magnificent in its proportions and rounded in its symmetry, is clothed in the blouse of the ordinary soldier; from the belt that girds the lithe waist a short skirt descends nearly to the knees, beneath which heavy leather leggings cannot conceal the shapely legs, nor campaign shoes destroy the grace of the high-instepped little feet.

This girl, or woman, has a commanding bearing. Upon her blouse are the insignia of military rank, though she kneels to accept the consolation of the Church, administered to her by a bare-footed Franciscan, as devoutly as any peasant who bears a musket for Don Carlos. All about obey her with a reverence that speaks not only the discipline of the soldier, but an adoration such as is only given to a holy leader in a patriot cause.

As Evelyn gazes he sees the same look on the faces of these Basque mountaineers as were on the soldiers that followed the Maid of Orleans to battle with the chivalry of England. A second after one throws away his life to save hers as a Spanish volley tears up the ground about her.

"*Viva* Our Lady and her banner!" is the cry of these dogged mountain peasants as they drive back the trained infantry of Spain, for two strong regiments of the line are attacking them in their front, and another one is clambering up the mountain side to both overlook and outflank them.

But this movement, which if carried out will be fatal, is defeated by the woman leader. At her signal some hundred hardy Basques scale a cliff high up the mountain side, and making a fortress of this, scourge back the Regiment of Santander, who are slower in their movements than mountaineers, who can climb like the wild goats of the Pyrenees.

Then the firing slackens, the wolf has not yet closed his jaws upon the cat; the veteran Spanish infantry give slowly back. There is a lull before the storm breaks again.

But this respite is not for long—a battery of rapid-fire Gatlings have obtained position upon the opposite mountain. This opens! Its pitiless rain of bullets keeps down the Carlist fire; the Spanish bugles once more sound the charge. Again the Regiment of Santander essays the mountain side.

This time, rendered cautious by heavy losses, it takes advantage of a ravine that, running up the range shields it from the direct fire of the Carlists on the cliff. Up this gorge the Spanish infantrymen clamber to a height that commands the rebel point of vantage. Then the Gatlings from across the valley pelt with unceasing showers of leaden death its peasant holders, till, as the Regiment of Santander, deployed as skirmishers, crawling from rock to boulder, and from boulder to tree, overwhelms the mountaineers, who do not fly, but stand and fight till there are no more left of them to die.

Then the Carlist post up the mountain side being no more defended, the two regiments of regulars in the valley and on the lower slopes come on—steady and pitiless—slaughtering the rebel wounded as they gradually gain ground, for these troops are veterans of the "Ten Years' War" in Cuba, and have potted many a Pacifico in the Marial swamp, and butchered many an island fugitive on the Montes Cobre. They have been educated to give no quarter.

Assaulted by overwhelming numbers in front, and crushed by an enfilading fire from the mountain top which is lost to them, the Carlist band give back sullenly, doggedly, making each foot of ground cost a Spanish soldier's life. But they do not fight with that wild ardour which had given them vantage in the first attack; they seem to lack both confidence and direction—the little garrison of the hillside cliff has never been reinforced—these peasants take no advantage of their enemies' mistakes—they are without a leader.

In vain Evelyn searches the fight, he sees no more the woman who had seemed to carry victory in her fair hand.

A sudden sorrow flies through his heart. What man does not grieve a little for a woman who adores him—even though none of his passion answers her ardour or caresses. Young Darley gasps: "Rufina! She is dead! Since the last attack she is no more in the front rank of her people—that is why they despair."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE AGONY OF "OUR LADY."

But Doña Rufina lived. Her absence from the battle had been brought about by the agency of a very little thing—a cigar.

In the lull of the firing, after the repulse of the first attack, Rufina, as she went about encouraging her men, chanced to come upon young Pachaco, who was lolling behind a huge rock just in the rear of his company, and smoking a cigar contentedly.

"Good morning, Don Orfélo," said the Señora graciously.

"My Lady, I kiss your hand," answered the lieutenant, rising and saluting.

"You are still unwounded, I hope."

"Yes, and very comfortable, honored Doña."

"*Dios*, you should be comfortable, smoking a cigar. Oh, how I envy you!" cried Rufina, longingly. "A cigarette has not passed my lips this accursed week. I lost every *cigarrillo* when our camp equipage was abandoned."

"Will Our Lady honor me by accepting an Imperial?" murmured the Carlist lieutenant. "I have another."

"Will I smoke? *Diablo,* will I *not* smoke? *Gracias caballero,* it is next to the breath of life!" And the Amazon placed a big Imperial between her patrician lips, and lighting it with the air of an accomplished smoker, puffed contentedly though a few Spanish bullets splintered the rocks around her. Then she questioned suddenly: "What good fortune brought this divine thing to you, lucky Orfélo?"

"This cigar," said the young man, "I received from the husband of the handsome Englishwoman."

"The Englishwoman!" exclaimed Rufina, astounded. Her face grew gloomy. "Handsome English women are rather a bad omen to me," she muttered. Then she questioned rapidly: "Where did you encounter this Englishwoman?"

And as Orfélo tells his story, Rufina's eyes begin to sparkle, an agony comes into her face, his description of the lady is so much like Marion Wilton.

"The same grey eyes, the same fair hair, the same graceful, clinging beauty," she murmurs to herself; then eagerly, almost affrightedly demands: "Her name?"

"Lady Severne."

"Ah-h-h!" A sigh of relief comes from lips which had grown pale.

"*Dios de mi Madre,*you are not wounded, Lady of our Band!" cries the lieutenant, affrighted, her agitation has been so great.

"No, not a scratch. *Santa Maria,* I bear a charmed life, Orfélo," laughs Rufina. "Though the usurper's sharpshooters keep an eye on me."

She places on the end of her sabre a coquettish sombrero tipped with an eagle's feather, and pokes this above the boulder that shields her companion and herself. A moment later she brings it down, looks at it, and exclaims: "*Santos,* I *am* extravagant! Here is a two hundred-franc creation of Virot's made into a cullander. That will be a warning to you to be cautious, young man. We shall have fifteen minutes of rest before the infantry of our tyrant again attacks us, and——" She throws herself down carelessly beside him and smokes her cigar contentedly in the shadow of death.

After blowing up a few blue wreaths between her white teeth, she remarks: "The husband of this beautiful Englishwoman, what of him after he gave you the cigar and he and his wife were brought to our campfires?"

"Oh, Lord Severne!" returns the lieutenant. "He has been denounced as a spy by—by your brother."

"Yes, Domingo hates all Englishmen for the sake of one." Then she suddenly exclaims: "But my orders are that no prisoner shall be shot without I know it!"

"Don Domingo *did* order him shot, but I——" replies Orfélo, "showed Don Fabricio, the captain of the day, that it would be well for him to keep the fusillade until he heard from you."

"My brother shall hear from me for disregarding my orders! Does he not know that he is as subject to my military discipline as any peasant who holds a rifle under me? Besides, why is not Don Domingo here to take his place in the line of battle, Señor?"

"I do not know, my lady."

"My Heaven, maybe Domingo is wounded! *O Madre*, he may be killed! Orfélo, keep a sharp eye on the enemy, they will be moving soon. If so, report them to me at once."

And she glides away cautiously and skillfully, protecting herself from Spanish bullets with the agility of a chamois hunter, for Doña Rufina has been in Carlist wars before. To her enquiries among the men as to her absent brother, she gets no response till one of the soldiers who chanced to have seen the affair, replies, saluting, "My Lady, thy brother has gone to say his prayers to the beautiful Englishwoman confined in the hut by the mountain stream."

"Not in the line of battle! Condemned her husband to be shot! *Dios*, the infamous one!" mutters Rufina to herself. "Deserting his post for the love of bright eyes. For the good name of our house, no harm must come to this poor English girl. Her loveliness must be as sacred in the Pyrenees as in England itself. No shame must come upon the followers of Don Carlos. Our dying cause is too holy a one to be desecrated by an outrage upon unprotected beauty."

With this idea, looking across at the Spanish lines, she thinks she will have time enough, and calling some half dozen men to attend her, flies up the mountain path intent upon saving one of her sex from the brother whose passions she knows are as great as her own, and whose honesty and nobility of soul are much less.

* * * * * *

In the cabin up the mountain beside the rushing torrent Marion is well shielded from the dangers of the fight below, for the little ravine in which the hut rests runs at right angles to the main valley, and its precipitous sides permit the entry of no bullets, the flight of these being at right angles to it.

For one moment Lady Severne, as she was led to this place by the Carlist soldiers, thought it was for her safety. But this idea lasted scarcely a minute. She has not been permitted to see her husband, neither have the soldiers who have placed her in this retreat, been over-punctilious, but have rather roughly hurried her up the path. As the English girl has stepped into the forlorn, desolate hut, whose only furniture is a pile of straw, and whose only comfort is the embers of a half-expired fire upon the rude clay hearth, she has heard one of the men in his patois call her a woman spy. With this an inkling of her situation flies to her, faint and dim at first, but reinforced as she springs to the door and finds the oaken barrier to her escape closed. She hears the heavy beam which secures it on the outside dropped into position. Flying to the little orifice which serves as a window, she cries to the men: "Señors, what mean you? You have called me a spy; do you call my husband likewise?"

"*Si, Señora Inglès Espia?*"

"My husband is imprisoned also?"

"No! *Diablo*, the male bird is to be shot!" guffaws a retreating Carlist.

"Oh, Heaven! You know not what you do!" screams the frantic girl. "Shot! Evelyn, my adored! My husband!"

With her delicate hands she strives to force open the heavy door, but only bruises her slight fingers against its oaken planks. She must get out! She must tell them the truth before—oh, merciful heaven!—they shoot him. And every dropping shot that comes from the skirmishers in the valley below seems to her the fusillade of death for the being she loves.

This anguish is interrupted by another—perchance a more cruel one. Even as she struggles with the door she hears the bolts removed and sees before her a Carlist officer.

For a moment, in its bronze of summer campaign and full Alva-beard, she does not recognize the face.

But he salutes her, saying: "Do not you recollect me, Marion? Don't you remember your old adorer?"

"Oh, Heaven must have sent you to me, Don Domingo. My husband! They are going to shoot him! In the valley! They have mistaken him for a spy! Save him!"

"It was on his account that I came to you, *mi querida*."

"God bless you!" In her anguish she scarce notes the ardour of his address.

"The circumstances under which your husband was arrested are er—er—very serious. His French passport describes him as Lord Severne. I know him to be Evelyn Darley."

"Yes; but that title has come to him since we were married. Have you not heard of our good fortune? And now it is going to kill him!" she wails; then cries: "Run! Tell them they are mistaken!"

"I fear there is no mistake!"

"Yes, there is! They will listen to you. You are an officer!"

"I command here."

"Oh, God be praised! Fly and save him!"

"It was upon my orders he was condemned."

"I—I cannot understand you." Marion's pale face twitches with anxious astonishment.

"Ah, but you will soon, *niña de mis ojos!*" replies Domingo.

His tone is eager, his eyes blazing. The fresh yet delicate beauty of Lady Severne is even more alluring to the Spaniard than had been the more immature charms of Marion Wilton. The light graces of her figure have developed into the fuller contours of superb womanhood—the face has more soul in it, therefore it can have greater passion—the rosebud has expanded till it is the perfect flower—one he would pluck with sacrilegious hand.

Desperation has added a brightness to Marion's eyes and a vivacious nervousness to each gesture of the rounded arms, each pose of the exquisite figure—her every loveliness defeats her pleadings with this ardent ruffian. He whispers: "You and you only can save your husband."

"I! How? Quick! Let us go!"

"To save him you must remain here."

"Then you will go?"

"Not at present, *mi alma!* Not till you give me the love you spurned in faraway England. Not till you sacrifice something to make me forget in rapture I am a traitor to our cause in permitting the spy to escape, because I love you."

"You must be mad!" cries the girl. "Wedded to him, how can I love you—or any other man than he who has my vows?"

"*Sapristi,* simple one, you have visited Paris since you have married; there you must have become woman of the world enough to know that ladies love other *caballeros* than their husbands." Don Domingo's arm seeks to encircle the loveliness he craves.

"Infamous!" shudders the girl, retreating a step or two from the burning lips that seek hers so eagerly. "I——" Her face, which has been very pale, becomes of a sudden blazing red with the blush of affrighted innocence. Her hands fly to hide her eyes, for now she understands. To her anguish is added shame.

"*Cielo*, you understand. Answer, my beautiful one! You will be kind to him who adores you. Speak quickly. The battle is beginning below. I must join my men. If you will love me now, I will forget your cruelty of two years ago, and save your husband. Ah, *Dios!* you yield to my love at last." For Marion is nearly fainting.

But she springs away from him; then turns, like Diana at bay, and shudders: "That would give death to both of us! After my shame Evelyn would not wish for life and I should pray for death! Your mercy is more cruel than your vengeance. You, who call yourself a gentleman, are worse than Pepé, the bandit; he would have only robbed me of my diamonds." The girl's Saxon eyes have become haughty yet glittering. She cries, hoarsely: "You have called my husband a spy, then I am also a spy! If he is to die, I can die with him. Out of my way, you Spanish cur!"

And Don Domingo does get out of her way, for a savage yet musical voice, speaking from the entrance of the cabin, commands: "Out of my way also, Spanish cur! I call you that though you are my brother. You are absent from your post during the hour of battle! For this I should shoot you down with my revolver as you cringe before me here."

"You give me a dog's death," snarls Don Domingo, and he looks as though he would oppose her authority, but the soldiers who have followed their lady up the mountain path even at his rebellious glance cock their rifles, and the colonel knows that a single movement on his part or at a single word from their woman chieftain will shoot him.

"Not so, my brother," says his sister. "Though you merit it, my hand shall not be covered with your blood. Join your command, step into the front rank, fight for your king, and if God gives you death I will forgive you."

"But if I come back alive?"

"Then—military punishment. I doom you to die for our cause! Let a soldier's fate palliate the infamy of your last hour upon earth. Go!" Rufina, who has not entered the cabin as yet, points towards the line of battle.

"*Diablo*," mutters Domingo, "I must die!" He reads that in Rufina's eyes as she directs her men to see the colonel into the front rank of the fight.

"*Adios,* my sister," he murmurs, and kissing the stern hand that indicates the way to death, strides down the path.

"*Por Dios,*" he cogitates, as he walks. "She means what she says." A sinister smile runs over his swarthy features, he laughs to himself in a despairing jocularity. "She does not yet know the woman she has saved. She does not guess who is the spy I ordered shot below. *Mi hermana,* your despair will be greater than mine—when you learn." Suddenly he guffaws: "*Diablo,* she knows now!" For a scream as if a woman's heart were breaking comes echoing from the cabin up the ravine.

Within its portal the two women are facing each other, and one has cried "Marion!" the other "Rufina!" and Lady Diarrogh's voice has grown nervous and sharp with sudden agony as she falters: "The man who is to be shot as a spy? The man for whose life you were to give your love to my brother is——"

"My husband!"

"*Santissima!* Evelyn! The man I love! Killed by that infamous one! The soldiers said that they were to shoot a spy!" Then she remembers how absolute she is, and laughs: "Ah, but it was against my orders, and my orders are obeyed! Thy husband lives, girl!"

"God be praised! You are sure?"

"Certain as that every peasant of my band would die for me! Quick! Follow me! Do you fear bullets?"

"For the man I love!" cries the English girl. "No more than you."

"Then come with me."

The two women run down the path to where it opens on the valley—the combat is before them.

Suddenly Rufina pauses, her eyes glaze with dread and horror. She whispers: "Too late—my brother has killed thy husband!"

"How?—tell me!" shrieks the English wife.

"See that cabin far down the mountain path—the one upon which the Spanish troops are advancing—the one from about which my peasants are being driven! In that the man we love is held—when the troops of our tyrant capture it—*ay de mi!*—they will kill all living men about it."

"Impossible! Evelyn is English—a non-combatant!"

"*Diablo!* These regiments have fought Filipinos and Cubans—they have been taught to make no prisoners—they—Oh, *Madre de Dios*, my boys give back!"

"It is because you do not lead them, Lady of our hearts," mutters a wounded peasant, gloomily.

"Not lead them? Look on me! See Doña Rufina strike one more blow for her cause and her love!"

She is in the front rank of the fight. Her Basques cry: "*Viva Nostra Madre!*" and rally.

"Follow me to that cabin," she commands.

"Holy Virgin! The whole Regiment of Tarragona is about it——"

"Follow me."

"To the death!" they cry, and follow her.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"THIS IS MY LOVE!"

By this time the young Englishman also thoroughly appreciates his desperate strait. He has watched the Carlist defence, undirected, desultory, drift down the valley nearer to him with each charge, closer to him with each volley. Imprisoned in the shepherd's hut, Evelyn can neither fight nor fly.

Remembering Don Fabricio's sneering suggestion that the Spanish regulars will ask no questions but butcher him as he has seen them do all others who have fallen into their hands this day, Lord Severne guesses there is for him no hope, and his heart grows cold as he thinks, "Is there no hope for her? My wife! Marion! What infamy of providence has brought her to a cruel death or worse? When I am gone who will protect her?" To this he adds, grimly: "That won't be long."

For the combat has come very close to him; the Carlist peasants are giving back more rapidly and more easily than they had in the first few minutes of their retreat.

"My fate is upon me," he thinks, as a bullet chips off a piece of stone that bounds the orifice through which he peers. The shepherd's hut is now in the peasant's skirmish line; the Spanish troops think it must be occupied by their enemies, and the rapid-fire guns from higher up the slope shower it with Gatling-bolts. These piercing the thatched roof as if it were so much paper, make the place an inferno of splashing lead and splintering stone. Were the hut not built into the mountain, Darley would not exist ten seconds; but crouched behind the wall embedded in the hill, these bullets scream over him, scourging the other side of the cabin. Suddenly this hail ceases. The crouching man springs up, looks through the orifice, and sees right under his eyes a very dark and bloody scene. The machine-gun fire has stopped because the Spanish troops now surround the cabin. Six or seven wounded Carlists, as they lie outside, Evelyn sees bayoneted. Already one or two dark faces are peering into the holes in the stone wall seeking for victims inside the hut. The blackness of the interior defeats them. In the gloom they can not discover the crouching man.

A moment after the Englishman mutters, " My time has come," as he hears the Spanish soldiers forcing the door. Suddenly the volley firing of the Government troops becomes heavier, as if at last they had found something better than rocks to shoot at.

A sergeant cries, " That she-devil again! She is leading them once more! "

A private shouts, "The witch! The leadproof witch who no sharpshooter can hit. *Carrejo*, they are charging with her at the head of 'em!"

The next second there is a hand-to-hand fight all about the little cabin; its door is forced as by a battering-ram, the hut is crowded with peasant warriors.

Heading them is a wild-eyed Amazon, who cries: "My Evelyn! Alive! Thank God, thy Rufina is at thy side!" And the mountain nymph, looking like a goddess of victory, but smeared with blood like a butcher's boy, presses sweet, warm, passionate lips upon his; for he is too dazed to do aught but gaze at her.

This lasts scarcely a moment.

The Spanish troops having been driven back, and the Carlists having once more retaken the hut, the Gatlings on the mountain side again open on the shepherd's cot. The peasants fall dead or retreat from it. He holds her in his embrace crouched behind the wall, below the line of Spanish fire. As the bullets sizz over them she gives him a kiss and laughs, "Courage, Evelyn, courage! Thy Rufina is with thee! Thy Rufina saves thee! *Caramba*, beautiful one, courage!" Then suddenly she sighs: "*Ay de mi*, you—you will have to carry me back."

"Good Heavens, you are wounded!"

"Ah, yes, a—a little— That—that machine gun up on the hill."

"Then *I* will save *you!*"

Taking her in his arms, Evelyn gets her from the hut scourged by the fire of the machine guns and Spanish infantry.

"I—I am too heavy. You will lose your life. Leave me, *mi querida.*"

"Leave you, who braved death for me? That is not our English way."

"I—I am very heavy."

"H-m-m, light as a mountain sylph!" In the excitement he feels her one hundred and fifty pounds of beauty no more than the weight of a schoolroom chit, as he lightly and tenderly carries her from rock to rock, from tree to tree.

So by God's blessing he comes back alive into the Carlist line, bearing the girl they call their chieftain.

And she is whispering to him, laughing and murmuring: "In your arms at last, my beautiful Saxon, whose fair head the dark-browed Señorita loves—but not for long. Your wife is just up the trail. Here, Marion, take him! I must go with my lads again."

Rufina struggles up and tries to stagger to the fight, for her peasants are being once more driven back. Their goddess is wounded, despair has come upon them; the Spanish infantry are moving up more irresistibly than before, and the Gatlings rushed along the mountain side pelt them from above more mercilessly in their retreat than in their advance.

So bearing on a litter made of rough boughs their wounded mistress, the Carlists speed through the dizzy defiles of the mountains making for the Port d'Aula. The French frontier is before them; within it is safety; but across it they are no more soldiers, simply refugees.

"Make one more stand!" begs their Lady, as they bear her along. "One more stand upon this ground, the last upon which we can fight as followers of Don Carlos!"

They halt and, throwing up entrenchments on the precipice that flanks the narrow trail, stand at bay. But their enemy does not approach immediately; taught by their awful losses, these regiments have learned to be wary of these depairing peasants. Without food this Carlist band must in a day or two disperse, to live.

Noting the respite, Rufina half rises in her litter.

"Now—now I have time to save you!" she whispers to Evelyn and Marion as they bend beside her.

"Save *us?* You *have* saved us!"

"No; not yet. My brother still lives. I can see his cruel face scowling behind the last of the rear guard. When I die——"

"Die!" gasps Marion.

"Yes. *Santos*, I have shot enough in me to kill a dozen men generals," jeers the lady chieftain. "Every step as I have been brought here has caused me drops of blood—internal hemorrhage, I think a doctor would call it—if we had one—but our only apothecary was slain a week ago."

Her voice is so faint, Evelyn shudders. He guesses she has told the truth.

"When I am dead," continues Rufina, "my brother will command, and then I fear for the man he calls the English spy, and the woman whose beauty has made him a devil. Here, my men!" she calls aloud, but gasps doing it. "Bring Don Domingo before me. There he is, skulking by the side of that fir tree—talking to a fellow whose bad face I have seen before—some ruffian who fears the troops of the tyrant more than he does us."

Though he would make resistance, Don Domingo is led to her, and with him the man who has been in consultation with him.

This fellow, with a red necktie, big jack postilion boots, and long heavy Spanish spurs, has been whispering to him: "I did it at the hint of Doña Mercedes. I have placed these people in your hands. This man you hate. This woman, whose beauty you love, whose diamonds I love—she carries them in her satchel slung from her shoulder. Give me her plunder; you take what you love best."

To them, as they stand scowling before her, Rufina says: "Before I die——"

At this, her peasants cross themselves and moan

"God forbid," and tears roll down seamed faces of hardy mountaineers.

"Before I die—*justice!* My brother, condemned by the laws of war to death for deserting your place in the line of battle, condemned by the laws of God for using military power to destroy the innocence of womanhood, you have come back alive from a battle in which I sentenced you to die. I keep my word. Take him away and shoot him to death."

At this Domingo, whose face has grown pallid, his eyes bright with despair, snarls: "Will you obey this dying woman?" then cries: "Who'll dare lay their hands upon a colonel of Don Carlos?" and there is some dissent from one or two officers.

But she gasps: "Obey me, *caballeros*, or you die, likewise. Do my bidding, peasants; you at least are true!" she says to the mountaineers.

"Aye, that we are!" cries Sergeant Valdez. "Every man of us." And despite his struggles and his threats, they drag away Domingo.

Then she turns upon the other man brought before her.

"Pepé Tomas," she begins, "I know you, and I have heard from young Pachaco—who, bless God, still lives—of your crime against the man I love. I know you. You are the last bandit in the Pyrenees."

"And you," growls the postilion, surlily, "are the last Carlist."

"And the last Carlist makes an end of the last bandit!" she jeers. "Breconridge!" she calls.

The dumb servitor kneels before her and kisses her hand, the tears streaming down his scarred cheeks.

"Take this ruffian away and hang him to that tall fir tree."

To her command the silent jaws wag together, seeming to answer: "Aye, that I will, or any other word of yours, my beloved mistress."

The dumb one seizes in his grasp the weazened form of the screaming Pepé.

Suddenly the subdued sound of six rifle shots echo up the gorge.

"That volley makes me know my brother is dead and that the man I love is safe!" she whispers. "I—this has exhausted me. Lovell—but he was slain three days agone. Orfélo, to my side. Promise me on your word of honour to guard this gentleman and lady across the frontier; it is but a hundred yards. Swear to me that their lives will be safe when I am dead."

"Dead!" cries Evelyn, kneeling beside her litter. "You must not die."

"Ah," whispers Marion, "you have saved my husband for me with your own life. Be happy with us. Rufina—dear Rufina, live and be happy with us!"

"Bah! would you give him to my arms? Ah, blonde-haired one, you shudder at the thought! Live—and be happy! Bosh! There is no joy in living when one has loved as I have and lost as I have. Evelyn, I—I cannot see very well." The glorious eyes are growing dim.

The Englishman silently takes her hand that seems to grope for him.

"Evelyn," she gasps, "my Saxon boy, fair-haired, bright-eyed, with passion cold as a diamond, while mine for you is ruby as my blood, once it would have been rapture to live for you if you had—had loved me."

Her breath comes fluttering from her full lips, whose bright crimson has already turned to pallid grey.

"Let me feel your breath and know I've saved you." Her arms get round him. "*Diablo*, it was happiness to spill my blood that yours might remain in the fair, strong body that I love. It was joy to fight for you; it was beatific to kill for you; but *caramba*, it is ecstasy to die for you! That is my love!"

My lady's banner flutters down and flies at half-mast.

Half an hour afterward Darley bears a woman's body tenderly in his arms across the frontier, away from bloodshed, far from war, into the quiet and the peace of the fair land of France.

The next morning they are in the pretty little town of Castellon, with the tricolour flying over it.

Little Harcourt, who has journeyed round from Luchon, prattles to Lord Severne on the veranda of the hotel: "Yes, dear boy, we hunted all over the mountains for you. There was a devil of a row when you disappeared, you and your beautiful wife. They tell me the Lady of the Revolution died for you! Ah—er—we Anglo-Saxons are too philosophic to go into such paroxysms of passion about anyone—even ourselves. Oh, don't shake your head. Don't flatter yourself your wife, Lady Severne, would have taken up such tantrums about you, my boy. Not quite the proper form."

But even as he speaks in the little room above a beautiful Englishwoman is bending over the corpse of a beautiful Spanish one, and weeping very bitter tears because her rival has been taken away from earth.

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